

## Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022)



## Editors' Introduction

by Robert F. Carley, *andré m. carrington*, SAJ, Eero Laine, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022)

**ABSTRACT** In this introduction, the editors continue their reflections on scholarly editing in the pandemic, welcome two new co-editors, and announce a grant-funded initiative that builds on *Lateral* Forums. This issue features three regular articles, book reviews, and the first installment of a special section, "Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry," which builds on the "Cripistemologies of Crisis" special section, edited by Theodora Danylevich and Aly Patsavas, last year.

**KEYWORDS** anti-Blackness, cultural studies, publishing, scholarly communication, pandemic

As 2022 draws to a close, this issue of *Lateral* comes into being with three articles, book reviews, and the first part of an extensive special section. Scholarly publishing in the pandemic era continues to present challenges and opportunities. Academic approaches to the pandemic have drawn attention to existing hierarchies and how they—and resistance to them—have been amplified in this period. Other approaches have ranged from thinking “fun” and “precarity” to considering how to continue our profession-as-usual with an “ethics of care.” Both in process and in content, *Lateral*'s contributions emphasize pleasures and practices that exceed and supplement these approaches: solidarity, shared labor, and community. Our work has been trying to live, think, and create in the now without the backward-looking accelerationism of trying to rebuild what was or solve what might be.

There are a number of initiatives at the journal that extend our collective work and impact in new ways. We are very pleased to welcome as *Lateral* co-editors *andré m. carrington*, Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, and Alyson K. Spurgas, Associate Professor of Sociology and affiliated faculty in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Trinity College. Their disciplinary backgrounds and research areas complement our existing editorial team, and we look forward to the new directions they will bring to the journal.

We are also excited to announce a grant award from the Social Science Research Council <  
<https://ramp.ssrc.org/the-social-science-research-councils-media-and-democracy->



[program-announces-four-grantees-for-the-research-amp-partner-sites-program/](#) to develop a new initiative of the journal. Led by Rayya El Zein and building on her work as editor of Lateral Forums < <https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/> >, The Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism Research Collective (CcRrrC) will host a trans-regional network of media makers, scholars, and activists working to help their communities identify and dismantle colorism and anti-Black racism. The project turns to local and regional media and popular culture as both archive and tool—an archive in which to trace culturally specific histories of representation; and a tool with which to raise awareness, mobilize, and inform. CcRrrC will prioritize perspectives grounded in local languages that are familiar with regional understandings of ethnicity, sect, religion, gender, and class—as well as race. The platform will host these perspectives in a transnational, comparative frame. CcRrrC builds from the understanding that white supremacy is a global phenomenon manifest in specific vernaculars. This work looks to support and sharpen tools available to communities as they combat colorism and anti-Black racism. The first instances of CcRrrC will unfold over the course of the coming year; [subscribe](#) < <https://csalateral.org/subscribe> > or [follow](#) < <https://twitter.com/lateraljournal> > us < <https://instagram.com/lateraljournal> > for more updates.

In our lead article this issue, "[Watchmen, Copaganda, and Abolition Futurities in US Television,](#)" < <https://csalateral.org/issue/11-2/watchmen-copaganda-abolition-futurities-us-television-hatrick-gonzalez/> > Jessica Hatrick and Olivia González argue that the 2020 HBO series *Watchmen*, while exploring the historical relationship between policing and white supremacy, ultimately reproduces copaganda conventions by glorifying police brutality and portraying white supremacist law enforcement characters as anomalous exceptions to an otherwise just police force. Through a close and critical reading of the series against the backdrop of the 2020 US protests for racial justice, the authors examine the carceral web in which Hollywood is caught and consider what abolitionist endings might look like on the screen. In the end, they argue, *Watchmen* fails to dismantle the need for police and refuses to acknowledge the anti-Blackness at the center of the police and prison complex.

Anthony Obst investigates W. E. B. DuBois's unpublished work, *A World Search for Democracy*, conceived of and begun (but not completed) in 1936 in the shadow of *Black Reconstruction*. In a correspondence with his publisher, DuBois writes, of *World Search*, that "I want to see how far I can induce Democracy, Fascism, and Communism to speak the same language and to draw into the picture the colored peoples of the world." *World Search* takes the form of a correspondence between two characters as they travel, assessing the state of democracy in different countries. Obst notes that DuBois's work provides a global frame for an enduring societal and political question placing formerly



enslaved and colonized people in that frame. In "Revolution of Thought and Action": W. E. B. Du Bois's World Search for Abolition Democracy," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/11-2/revolution-thought-action-du-bois-world-search-abolition-democracy-obst/>> Obst investigates *precisely how* DuBois frames the question of democracy. Drawing on the work of contemporary theorists, including Nancy Fraser, Sylvia Wynter, Sara Ahmed, Dylan Rodríguez, and others, Obst's original argument is that *World Search* can be read as offering outlines of abolition democracy as a three-fold project: political-economic, epistemic, and affective.

In "'Companionship and a Little Fun': Investigating Working Women's Leisure Aboard a Hudson River Steamboat, July 1919," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/11-2/companionship-and-a-little-fun-investigating-working-women-leisure-hudson-river-steamboat-1919-gallas/>> Austin Gallas provides an extensive cultural history of the policing of working class women's sexuality in the early twentieth century. As "progressive" reformers imposed a grid of sexual morality over urban space, especially Manhattan, through restrictions on social space, and using policing and surveillance techniques, steamboat excursions became an affordable means to escape moral regulation. Gallas investigates how these short and affordable trips, designed as attainable forms of leisure for working people—especially women—coincide with extraordinary efforts, both public and private, to observe, record, and police activities on these brief trips around the Hudson River. His exploration reveals an enormous fear and, at the same time, infantilization of working class people by people of status and means. Gallas's work captures the sexual and gender politics around the American working class in the early part of the twentieth century; it explores the fear around working class pleasures and the risks, associated with working class women in particular, involved in finding some small but very significant measure of autonomy.

In an installment growing from their special section, "Cripistemologies of Crisis," < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis/>> published in issue 10.2 (Fall 2021), Theodora Danylevich and Aly Patsavas's co-edited "Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry" < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/crip-pandemic-life/>> appears in this issue. Through fifteen contributions collected under the umbrellas of "praxis projects," "essays," and "creative works" and through the framing and analytical work in their introduction and roundtable conversation, Danylevich and Patsavas offer an essential and rich documentation of and reflection on disabled life and culture during the pandemic era. "Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry" provides novel insights into crip spacetime, care work, the ableist failures of institutions, and the multifacetedness of disability experience and wisdom. By drawing on contributions from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms, this special section "*crip*[s] both dominant pandemic discourses and scholarship more broadly, embracing knowledge-making across media." The special section will be



continued with further contributions and framing material in the forthcoming issue 12.1 (Spring 2023).

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## *Watchmen*, Copaganda, and Abolition Futurities in US Television

by Jessica Hatrick and Olivia González | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022)

**ABSTRACT** Through this article, we examine the history and conventions of copaganda in the United States, and critically consider how HBO's *Watchmen* has responded to and represented the historical relationship between policing and white supremacy. We argue that while *Watchmen* works to explicitly critique the history of white supremacist violence in US policing, the show reproduces several copaganda conventions. *Watchmen* depicts central law enforcement characters who commit violence as heroes, uplifts the main police character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, portrays white supremacist law enforcement characters as anomalous individual infiltrators (a.k.a. "bad apples"), and was created in collaboration with various members of law enforcement. After presenting this case study in contemporary copaganda, we consider how science fiction series can more meaningfully respond to the movement for police and prison abolition through representing abolitionist futures.

**KEYWORDS** police, television, science fiction, abolition, film, copaganda

## Introduction

During the summer of 2020, as an estimated fifteen to twenty-six million people in the United States participated in protests demanding justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery,<sup>1</sup> numerous subscription-based streaming platforms publicly declared that they were making content "highlighting stories by Black artists and/or about Black characters" freely available to their audiences.<sup>2</sup> Among them, Home Box Office (HBO) made its award-winning limited series *Watchmen* free to stream during the weekend of Juneteenth.<sup>3</sup>

Based on Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' award-winning 1986–87 graphic novel, HBO's *Watchmen* is set in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the central character, Detective Angela Abar, and her law enforcement colleagues are confronted with the return of a white supremacist vigilante group called the Seventh Kavalry. The series, which premiered in 2019, received



significant critical acclaim, earning eleven Emmys, four Television Critics Association awards, a Peabody Award, a Writer's Guild of America award, and a Gotham Independent Film Award. *Watchmen* was also widely praised for its portrayals of policing and racism in the US,<sup>4</sup> and its efforts to "explor[e] the legacy of systemic racism in America."<sup>5</sup> However, the series was also questioned and critiqued for those portrayals and their potential embodiment of "copaganda"—content that encourages audiences to see policing and police violence as fair, noble, and necessary.<sup>6</sup>

Through this article, we examine the history and conventions of copaganda in the US, and critically consider how HBO's *Watchmen* has responded to and represented the historical relationship between policing and white supremacy.<sup>7</sup> As Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton demonstrate, white supremacy is maintained through the gratuitous "repetition of violence as standard operating (police) procedure."<sup>8</sup> This repetition is due to the inherent instability of white supremacy, which requires a constant paranoia of loss and the resulting constant reinvention of whiteness via state absorption and co-option.<sup>9</sup> We argue that while *Watchmen* highlights the historical relationship between white supremacy and US policing, it ultimately reproduces copaganda conventions through depicting central law enforcement characters who commit violence as heroes, uplifting the main police character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, and portraying white supremacist law enforcement characters as anomalous individual infiltrators (a.k.a. "bad apples"). Subsequently, we consider how science fiction series can more meaningfully respond to the Movement for Black Lives through representing abolitionist futures.

## Copaganda

The origins of the term "copaganda" (a portmanteau of "cop" and "propaganda") are unclear. At present, the word appears to have been first used by Greg Beato, who wrote in 2003 that "mostly Hollywood has simply churned out malignant copaganda that glamorizes police brutality and normalizes the idea that the only good cop is a bad cop."<sup>10</sup> The concept has since been increasingly used to describe media content that "actively counters attempts to hold police malfeasance accountable by reinforcing the ideas that the police are generally fair and hard-working and that Black criminals deserve the brutal treatment they receive."<sup>11</sup> Copaganda thus refers to both fictional media that normalizes the power, presence, and violent practices of the police, and to the media produced by police forces themselves<sup>12</sup>—including the recent rise in police departments' utilization of social media in an attempt "to *manage* policing's visibility,"<sup>13</sup> and non-fiction, as shown in Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis*.<sup>14</sup> And copaganda involves both on-screen representations—depictions of policing—and behind-the-scenes processes—via the people, organizations, and power dynamics shaping why and how stories about policing are told.

In understanding how narratives of policing are told, we must understand how policing functions. As Micol Seigel discusses in *Violence Work*, the police act as “violence workers” and “the human-scale expression of the state.”<sup>15</sup> The state holds a monopoly over violence, and the police “make real” that monopoly.<sup>16</sup> The police also maintain racial capitalism through their state-sanctioned responsibilities, which include the following: “protect the property of the capitalist class; maintain stable conditions for capital accumulation; and defend against any threats to these unequal conditions of rule.”<sup>17</sup>

The police are legitimized by the state through what Correia and Wall name “copspeak”, defined as “a language that limits our ability to understand police as anything other than essential.”<sup>18</sup> In rendering police as essential, they are constructed as the “thin blue line” between order and savagery; thus, we are taught that “a life worth living, is impossible without police.”<sup>19</sup> Correia and Wall accordingly argue that not only are the police a reproduction of legitimized state violence, but they are also “a political idea” and “a product of sociohistorical forces.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, when copaganda normalizes the power, presence, and violent practices of the police, it normalizes the state’s monopoly over violence and maintains the social order of racial capitalism.

In this article, we focus on fictional copaganda, a significant source of public engagement with policing. As Lovell argues in *Good Cop, Bad Cop: Mass Media and the Cycle of Police Reform*, “it is through mass media that the public most often interacts with its community officials.”<sup>21</sup> And in the United States, such interactions predominantly involve fictional police characters; law-enforcement dramas have historically been “the single most popular form of television entertainment,” to the extent that “in a given week of prime-time viewing, the typical audience member will watch 30 police officers, 7 lawyers and 3 judges but only 1 scientist or engineer and only a small number of blue-collar workers.”<sup>22</sup> As Christopher P. Wilson discusses in *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth-Century America*, police work is considered “the most overrepresented profession in prime-time television.”<sup>23</sup>

These repetitive representations can, and should, be understood as part of what Loïc Wacquant names “law-and-order pornography.”<sup>24</sup> Wacquant describes law-and-order pornography as the orchestration, exaggeration, dramatization, and ritualization of “deeds proclaiming to fight crime and assorted urban disorders,” that much like pornographic movies “are extraordinarily repetitive, mechanical, uniform, and therefore eminently predictable.”<sup>25</sup> Wacquant argues that the spectacle provided by law-and-order pornography proves that Foucault was wrong when he argued that punishment would disappear from public view. Instead “a veritable industry trading on representations of offenders and law-enforcement has sprung forth and spread.”<sup>26</sup> Law-and-order pornography then reflects a repetitive cultural production of law-and-order representations

that “dramatize moral norms” and normalize “society’s revenge against the social misfits onto whom displaced societal anxiety fastens” reproducing the belief that the police and our current law-and-order system are needed.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, while copaganda is specific to the portrayal of police, it is part of a broader investment in not only normalizing but naturalizing our current justice system. Copaganda encourages audiences to empathize with law enforcement and with the ideology that policing and police violence are necessary.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, however, this isn’t true for all audiences. As Howard Bryant writes, “the image of the police divides almost exclusively along racial and class lines. The white mainstream accepts an image of benevolence, fairness, and *justice*,” while primarily Black and Brown communities, who have experienced over-policing their whole lives “know firsthand that the police are *possibly* all of those things but also *definitely* can be brutal, oppressive, merciless, aggressive, and extralegal.”<sup>29</sup> Bryant thus highlights the need for scholars to examine the politics of representation of policing in US popular media.

As Stuart Hall describes in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, the politics of representation involve “how language and representation produce meaning” and “how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied”; thus, requiring us to look at “the way representational practices operate in concrete historical situations, in actual practice.”<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, in this article, we situate HBO’s *Watchmen* within the broader history of US copaganda production as we examine the show’s depictions of policing and consider the contextual factors that shaped those representations.

## Copaganda Production in the US

The US film and television industries and police have a long history of working together to normalize police power. In the early twentieth century, before film—as a form of expression—became protected under freedom of speech (*Burstyn v. Wilson*, 1952), police departments and organizations used state power to control media circulation and consumption via public censure and censorship.<sup>31</sup> Police organizations also directly influenced—and continue to shape—cinematic portrayals of policing through collaborations with filmmakers and studios.

For example, *Dragnet* (1951–1959)—considered the originator of the modern “cop show”—was created in partnership with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The show’s creator, Jack Webb, agreed that all *Dragnet* scripts would be approved by the LAPD’s



Public Information Division in exchange for story ideas, financial support, and the freedom to shoot footage anywhere in the city.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, LAPD officers served as extras and their vehicles were used as props. This approval agreement granted the LAPD substantial power over *Dragnet's* depictions; "the comments weren't advisory: If the department objected to something . . . the entire episode might be scrapped."<sup>33</sup> This agreement set a precedent for future productions of fictional cop shows in partnership with real police. For example, *Highway Patrol*, which aired from 1955–59, was created in response to California Highway Patrol (CHP) commissioner Bernard Caldwell demanding that the CHP's public relations department "get us a show like *Dragnet*."<sup>34</sup> And today, police maintain close ties with Hollywood through consulting on, acting in, and reviewing materials for films and television shows that portray law enforcement. Police also retain a "routine presence on film and TV sets shot on location" as security forces monitoring sets, controlling crowds, and directing traffic.<sup>35</sup>

*Dragnet's* representational practices also set the scene for the contemporary cop genre. The show modeled several central copaganda conventions, such as perpetuating the "bad apple" narrative. As *Dragnet's* protagonist, Sergeant Friday, plainly stated in the series' third season, "police brutality, that's another story, we try to prevent it in the first place by not hiring brutal men . . . occasionally a bad apple slips through or a good apple turns bad. Well, my friend, you don't want him on the job and the department doesn't want him either."<sup>36</sup> *Dragnet* also erased the relationship between policing and white supremacy, often by representing a more racially and gender diverse police force. *Dragnet* depicted Black and Latine LAPD officers, but the real LAPD was segregated when it was produced. Other defining features of copaganda include over-representing the narratively and aesthetically "exciting" elements of policing; centering and humanizing the police rather than the victims of crime or those criminalized by the police; erasing the effects of policing on a broader community; and celebrating and naturalizing the use of extralegal violence by police as justified. Through this article, we consider if and how HBO's *Watchmen* employs these conventions.

## *Watchmen*: A Case Study in Contemporary Copaganda

To analyze *Watchmen's* portrayals of policing and potential reproduction of copaganda conventions, we examined the show's content and context. For the former, we employed four stages of qualitative data collection and analysis. First, we independently conducted thematic analyses of the first season of *Watchmen*—observing and taking detailed notes on each episode. Through these notes, we recorded our observations of a) the show's depictions of law enforcement characters (e.g., their actions, appearances, and

relationships with other characters); b) notable plot points; c) salient quotes from characters' discussions around policing, justice, and white supremacy; and d) depictions of violence and vigilantism. We then combined and collaboratively analyzed our notes, identifying key themes and exploring how discourses around policing, racial politics, and state-sanctioned and vigilante violence play out in each episode and the series as a whole. To explore the contextual factors shaping this content, we engaged with publicly available sources (e.g., The Official *Watchmen* Podcast, interviews with *Watchmen* creators, IMDb).

Using these methods, we found that *Watchmen* takes up the questions of morality, identity, and power explored in Alan Moore's (1986) original DC Comics series to explore the present, lived, masked realities of white supremacist violence. However, while HBO's *Watchmen* works to explicitly critique the history of white supremacist violence in US policing, it ultimately reproduces several copaganda conventions in its content and creation.

The first episode of HBO's *Watchmen* sets up a narrative of a police department that appears to understand the concept of white supremacy, experiences the violence that it breeds, and actively aims to eradicate it. The show opens with a dramatization of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 before the audience is transported to a fictional "present day" (2019) Tulsa, Oklahoma, in which a Black police officer is shot by a member of a white supremacist organization known as the Seventh Kavalry. The audience is subsequently introduced to Detective Angela Abar—a Black officer who is one of few survivors of a prior act of Seventh Kavalry violence—an organized attack targeting forty Tulsa cops on Christmas Eve. The attack referred to as the "White Night," catalyzed the creation and passage of the Defense of Police Act (DOPA), which allows police officers to conceal their identities (e.g., cover their faces using masks) while on duty.

Throughout the first episode, masked police officers hunt down and brutalize possible white supremacists. And the episode ends with the lynching of Tulsa's white Chief of Police, Judd Crawford—an act that appears, on the surface, to stem from his affiliation with the police department; in the final shot, the camera pans to frame his fallen, blood-stained badge. The first episode thus positions policing and white supremacy as working against each other, with policing presented as a solution to white supremacy. However, the series quickly subverts this narrative by highlighting the historical ties between policing, politics, and white supremacy. Detective Abar discovers a Ku Klux Klan robe with a golden police badge affixed to its chest in a secret compartment in Chief Crawford's wardrobe in the second episode. At this moment, the show's narrative of white supremacy begins to address the institutionalization of white supremacy via the police.

This history is further explored through the newly discovered relationship between Detective Abar, a present-day police officer in Tulsa, and her grandfather William (Will)

Reeves, a former New York City police officer from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the Emmy-award-winning episode six, "This Extraordinary Being," Detective Abar gains access to her grandfather's memories. In these memories, we discover that as a cop in New York City, Will was repeatedly seen as disrupting or defying standard policing operating procedures for not adhering to white supremacist norms (e.g., questioning his colleagues' decision to release the perpetrator of an anti-semitic attack). In response, those colleagues captured him, dragged him to a tree, put a hood over his head and a noose around his neck, and strung him up to be lynched. However, at the last minute, Will's colleagues release him and issue him a warning: "keep your Black nose out of white folks' business."<sup>37</sup> Later in the episode, Reeves comes across a Klan meeting at the back of a grocery store in Queens and a Klan storage space at a meatpacking warehouse, where he runs into some of his police officer colleagues.

In these scenes, art reflects reality, as there has long been historical evidence of members of white supremacist organizations infiltrating law enforcement.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, through Will's memories, including his discovery that his cop colleagues were members of the KKK and his experience surviving the 1921 Tulsa race riots, audiences are presented with the banality of the Klan's presence throughout the country. Throughout Will's life stages, he encounters their violence and widespread presence and power.

This banality is further depicted in the series' present-day timeline, in which audiences are introduced to the Seventh Kavalry. The fictional Seventh Kavalry was named after the non-fictional Seventh Cavalry Regiment, who are most well known for their role in the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the United States via the "American Indian Wars" enacted by the US nation-state. Director and executive producer Nicole Kassell describes the Seventh Kavalry as "a terrorist cell" wearing the mask of Rorschach (Walter Joseph Kovacs) from the original 1986 *Watchmen* graphic novel, who the creator Alan Moore described as "an extremely right-wing character."<sup>39</sup> Throughout *Watchmen*, key characters with access to power are revealed to be members of the Seventh Kavalry (including Chief of Police Judd Crawford, his wife, and Senator Joe Keene), reflecting reality by highlighting the ties between white supremacist organizations, politics, and policing.

Despite these critiques of white supremacy and the historical ties between policing and white supremacist organizations, *Watchmen* ultimately reproduces copaganda conventions and fails to show policing as a structurally white supremacist organization. Through portraying central police characters who commit violence as heroes, uplifting the main cop character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, and portraying the Seventh Kavalry's power as limited, *Watchmen* tells audiences that police violence is necessary, noble, and justifiable; forwards a notion of justice rooted in state punitivity; and depicts white supremacy as fringe and exceptional.



Throughout the series, members of Tulsa's present-day police force brutalize individuals in acts portrayed as necessary and noble. Detective Abar, in particular, repeatedly abuses her power as an officer throughout the show, with the support of her law enforcement colleagues. For example, in the first episode, Detective Abar is called to assist with the interrogation of a suspected Seventh Kavalry member. After non-violent interrogation tactics prove ineffective, Abar is permitted—even encouraged, “he’s not gonna talk, sans motivation”—to utilize violence.<sup>40</sup> Detective Abar brutally batters the suspect behind a closed door, as her colleagues, Chief Crawford, The Red Scare, and Looking Glass, listen stoically to the suspect’s anguished yells and watch his blood seep under the door. This scene depicts such violence as normal, as well as justifiable, as Abar remarks before enacting it that “I’ve got a nose for white supremacy, and he smells like bleach,” and “cop got shot, so we’re all a little wound up here.”<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in episode two, Detective Abar participates in a raid of Nixonville—a community of Nixon supporters and Seventh Kavalry members in Tulsa—where she is encouraged to join her colleagues in brutalizing suspects. At first, Detective Abar is hesitant to support the impending violence, encouraging The Red Scare and her other colleagues to “stop and just take a breath” before raiding Nixonville. The Red Scare expresses surprise at her reaction, remarking: “You don’t want to beat shit out of these fucks? You? She loves beating the shit out of these fucks.” Looking Glass affirms this sentiment: “That much is indisputable.” This dialogue suggests that violence is seen as a normal and justifiable operating procedure among Tulsa’s police force, and behavior that its members not only encourage but enjoy.

Abar maintains her initial caution as The Red Scare carries out the raid; she merely observes as her colleagues tase, toss, and drag civilians, remarking that “this shit is unnecessary.” However, a Nixonville resident’s attempt to hit Looking Glass with a baseball bat prompts Detective Abar to participate in such “unnecessary” measures: she throws the resident to the ground and repeatedly punches him in the face until blood streams from his nose and mouth and he loses consciousness. Looking Glass silently observes her actions, which—against the backdrop of the violent raid—affirms the normalcy of violence among *Watchmen*’s law enforcement characters.

Additionally, through implying that Detective Abar is rewarded with god-like powers in the final episode—presumably to enact her vision of justice—*Watchmen* authenticates the possibility of “good cops.” The show ends with the implication that Detective Abar has been granted Doctor Manhattan’s godlike powers.<sup>42</sup> In the *Watchmen* universe, Doctor Manhattan is the only genuinely superpowered being—after a radioactive particle test accident, he became an omnipotent, omniscient, glowing, blue-skinned being.<sup>43</sup>

While Detective Abar has, in theory, been fighting a white supremacist organization as a member of the police force, she ultimately protects the white supremacist nation-state. If

the show's goal is to offer a critique of the relationship between white supremacy and policing, we ask, what does it mean to grant god-like powers to a character that we have repeatedly seen abuse her power to protect the state over people (no matter how vile those people are)? We argue that this validates a notion of justice rooted in the necessity of state punitivity and violence.

Further, through depicting the Seventh Kavalry's presence and power as limited, *Watchmen* fails to portray white supremacy as systemic. Throughout *Watchmen*, there is no evidence that the Seventh Kavalry exists or has influence outside Tulsa. While the show draws ties between the Ku Klux Klan, the Cyclops (another white supremacist organization that Will Reeves encountered in New York), and the Seventh Kavalry, each group is portrayed as bearing limited influence outside of their immediate town and timeframe. Additionally, it is revealed that the Seventh Kavalry have been unknowingly doing the bidding of a wealthy industrialist, Lady Trieu, who kills all of them in the process. The series then suggests that through destroying their small organization, the Seventh Kavalry's ideologies and influence have also been destroyed.

Additionally, through portraying select white supremacist police and politician characters in the present-day timeline as evil, exceptional infiltrators of otherwise "good" institutions, *Watchmen* fails to show that policing is a structurally white supremacist organization. For example, Judd Crawford's ties to the Ku Klux Klan are framed as "skeletons in his closet"—an idiom suggesting that his relationship to white supremacy is an exceptional secret that would jeopardize his standing in the force. When in fact, as shown by Cerise Castle's reporting on gangs in the Los Angeles Sheriff's department, the exact opposite is often true.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, when Detective Abar informs her colleagues about the KKK robes in Crawford's closet, they challenge the implication that Crawford is a white supremacist; thus, while violence and the abuse of power is treated as a standard policing procedure, the presence of white supremacists in the force is treated as unfathomable or the result of "rotten apples." Thus, *Watchmen* portrays white supremacy as fringe and exceptional rather than structural and systemic.

Ultimately, while *Watchmen* illuminates the historical relationship between white supremacy and US policing, it fails to show policing as a structurally white supremacist organization. By portraying central law enforcement characters enacting violence as heroes, depicting the main police character as an eventually almighty arbiter of justice, and setting up white supremacist law enforcement characters as "bad apples," the show reproduces conventions seen throughout the history of US copaganda.

Further, as with other historical examples of copaganda, *Watchmen* was created in collaboration with various members of law enforcement. Filmed in Atlanta, *Watchmen* employed a local law enforcement officer as a police coordinator on all nine episodes, and

featured a famous local police K-9 decorated for working with his owner, a Georgian police sergeant, “to solve crimes, ferret out evil, capture bad guys and save lives.”<sup>45</sup> Additionally, one of *Watchmen*’s writers was a former Chicago police officer whose experiences engaging in police work directly shaped the show’s storytelling. As she shared, “I was a Black woman first and a police officer second. Having a badge didn’t shield me from discrimination on and off the force. So there was a certain duality to my life that provided some insight into Angela Abar’s character.”<sup>46</sup> These experiences shaped both her individual approaches to writing and the writer’s room more broadly. As another writer shared, this former officer “had these incredible stories that she would share with us about her experience in Chicago as a Black police officer, that I feel really, really helped us understand police violence and racial violence. And just hearing those stories, I think really helped me as a writer feel a part of the *Watchmen* world.”<sup>47</sup>

Notably, this former officer left the force, in part because they no longer wanted to participate in “a system that oppressed people of color . . . At some point, I was just like, you know what, I can’t do this anymore. I can no longer be a part of this system.”<sup>48</sup> This writer’s stance on policing is critical, but it does not appear to be abolitionist. As they shared on *The Official Watchmen Podcast*, while “Black people have always been the victims of institutional racism and police brutality. Us dying at the hands of police is nothing new. White supremacists have always been a part of law enforcement and are largely responsible for its toxic culture. I don’t believe all police are bad.”<sup>49</sup> Other *Watchmen* writers appear to hold similar stances, such as one writer who praised other fictional depictions of police that “highlight the mistakes in policing and the ways police can sometimes be ‘the bad guys.’”<sup>50</sup> We see these politics play out in the show’s propagation of a “bad apple” narrative of policing and portrayal of white supremacy as exceptional versus endemic in law enforcement.

## The Future of Fictional Portrayals of Police on TV

As the Black Lives Matter movement amassed widespread global support in the summer of 2020, Hollywood’s role in propagating dangerous ideologies about policing was subjected to increased intra-industry scrutiny. In June 2020, hundreds of actors, artists, authors, filmmakers, and executives collectively called on the US entertainment industry to examine and change its relationship with police forces and its production of copaganda. For example, on Juneteenth 2020, the Black Artists for Freedom collective issued an open letter and list of demands calling on “cultural institutions that depend on Black culture—publishing, writing, fashion, theater, film, television, visual arts, music, journalism, scholarship, education, social media—[to] commit to racial justice through material changes,” including condemning and cutting ties with the police, hiring, supporting, and

advocating for Black people, and “imagin[ing] Black freedom.” The letter and list amassed support from hundreds of signatories, including Ava DuVernay, John Legend, Sterling K. Brown, Lena Waithe, Tessa Thompson, and Lupita Nyong’o.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after, Kendrick Sampson, Tessa Thompson, Patrisse Cullors, and Melina Abdullah penned and published a second letter—which was also signed by hundreds of Black entertainment industry artists and executives—declaring that “because Hollywood has been a huge part of the problem, we demand it be a part of the solution.”<sup>52</sup> Specifically, Sampson et al. called on Hollywood to “divest from police” and invest in Black creators’ careers and communities. Additionally, as stated in the opening of their letter, “Hollywood has a privilege as a creative industry to imagine and create. We have significant influence over culture and politics. We have the ability to use our influence to imagine and create a better world.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, historically and currently, Hollywood encourages the epidemic of police violence and a culture of anti-Blackness. Thus, Sampson et al. called on Hollywood to not only divest from police and invest in Black lives, but to “divest from anti-black content” and “invest in anti-racist content.”<sup>54</sup>

Other industry professionals—including those who have previously contributed to the production of copaganda—have since echoed this belief that Hollywood has the power and the responsibility to shift ideologies of police violence, support Black lives, and to “be a part of the solution.” For example, Abel Ferrara, director of the 1992 police drama *Bad Lieutenant*, claimed, “what does Hollywood have? We have the ability to create images and tell stories and shine a light. It’s just standing up [against] what we all know is not correct.”<sup>55</sup> And as Aaron Rahsaan Thomas—co-creator of *S.W.A.T.*—claimed, shifting Hollywood’s narratives of the justice system is not a “creative burden, but a necessary responsibility.”<sup>56</sup> We argue that the next step in this responsibility is to represent abolitionist futures and alternative realities.

As Alex Vitale details in his book, *The End of Policing*, reform—and diversity initiatives, in particular—are not viable answers to addressing structural police violence. This is because “American police function, despite whatever good intentions they have, as a tool for managing deeply entrenched inequalities in a way that systemically produces injustices for the poor, socially marginal, and nonwhite.”<sup>57</sup> The historical relationship between policing and white supremacy is well-documented. The ongoing role and maintenance of white supremacy by US policing has most obviously been brought to light by the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the work of Aisha Beliso-De Jesus, Geoff Ward, and Vida B. Johnson.<sup>58</sup> However, mass media engagement with the inextricable ties between white supremacy and policing is almost nonexistent. Perpetuating structures of copaganda, the media continues to portray the police as representatives and arbiters of justice. As Martinot and Sexton describe in their article “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” police violence



has been depicted as a banal “standard operating procedure.”<sup>59</sup> This sense of banality is reproduced through the repetition of violence. We can see this through the police averaging around a thousand shootings a year;<sup>60</sup> shootings which—as the Black Lives Matter movement has made clear—disproportionately target Black, disabled, queer, and trans folk. Despite this, the media has refused to reckon with this relationship with few exceptions.

While subjected to increased public and intra-industry scrutiny,<sup>61</sup> US policing and Hollywood remain inextricably tied—police departments continue to fund Hollywood productions of copaganda, and Hollywood inspires recruiting tactics and justifies violence in police departments.<sup>62</sup> Racial justice organization Color of Change recommends that the media “commit to telling the truth about race in society, and telling the truth about the criminal justice system overall.”<sup>63</sup> We have come away from our research with a different conclusion.

Researchers have revealed that the US policing system is irreformable and have argued that to end white supremacy in the US, we must end the carceral state.<sup>64</sup> Thus, we propose that if Hollywood wishes to untangle itself from its carceral web, the media must portray narratives of police and prison abolition. Abolitionist organization Critical Resistance defines abolition as “a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.”<sup>65</sup> Additionally, abolitionists clarify that eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance requires more than closing prisons. It needs “the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.”<sup>66</sup> We thus understand abolition as both the negatory work of dismantling the violent systems and state structures we currently have, and the affirmative work of creating new systems and structures that Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to as “life-affirming institutions.”<sup>67</sup> Abolition has also been theorized as a “horizon,”<sup>68</sup> or, as Mathiesen calls it: “the unfinished.”<sup>69</sup> Understanding abolition as a horizon removes a binary notion of failure and success from the project, we cannot fail or succeed at abolition, only continue working toward it.<sup>70</sup> Or, as argued by Angela Davis, in understanding abolition as a horizon, we must imagine and explore multiple strategies toward it. According to Davis, “the first step, then, would be to let go of the desire to discover one single alternative system.”<sup>71</sup> We believe that presenting abolitionist narratives, media—and speculative fiction in particular—can play a huge role in exploring abolitionist strategies.

In their article, “Theorizing Ethnic and Racial Movements in the Global Age: Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement,” Crystal Fleming and Aldon Morris discuss how technology has served as a force to “transform how activists organize, communicate, and advance their

agenda in the public sphere."<sup>72</sup> While their focus on television looks at how non-fiction programming has historically exposed US hypocrisy via live news, documentaries, and other content, their arguments highlight the influential role that mass media can play in activism and point to the potential for fictional media to shape social movements. After its adaptation to television, activists across the globe have donned the scarlet cloaks worn by handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*.<sup>73</sup> In 2010, Palestinian protestors dressed as Na'vi from the 2009 film *Avatar* during demonstrations against the Israeli-imposed West Bank barrier near the occupied village of Bilin.<sup>74</sup> As one protestor proclaimed, referencing an iconic line from the film, "We are here Avatars and Na'vis fighting against the sky people who are taking away our land, and occupying our people."<sup>75</sup> This relationship between cultural production and revolutionary change arguably has a long history in literature and music; as Toni Cade Bambara argued, the job of the culture worker "is to make revolution irresistible."<sup>76</sup>

The end of policing and prisons requires imagination, and creating new societies that don't rely on carceral systems involves creativity. Media narratives can "constrai[n] the imaginative boundaries of liberation," but they also have the capacity to expand those bounds.<sup>77</sup> Both speculative fiction and television have long been assumed to have "low cultural esteem."<sup>78</sup> The majority of these productions have been fiction, in part because the literary world allows for smaller, more niche audiences and low-budget production costs. However, often speculative fiction ends up adapted by film rather than television, given their "shared investment in spectacle."<sup>79</sup> We suspect the lack of abolitionist narratives in speculative fiction film is reflective of mainstream media companies' investment in maintaining the status quo.<sup>80</sup> While *Watchmen*, alongside other pieces of televised speculative fiction critiquing white supremacy, such as *Lovecraft Country* and *Westworld*, has been released in the past few years, we hope to see television explore the niche of abolitionist and activist futures soon. As noted by Walidah Imarisha, "All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds."<sup>81</sup> And as Mark Rifkin argues in *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculation*, speculative writing has long enabled the political imaginaries required to create "modes of analysis and visions for liberation/decolonization/abolition."<sup>82</sup>

We argue that it is time for mainstream media to take up this capacity to create "visions for liberation" in imagining speculative worlds on television, and we extend some potential starting points. The work of speculative fiction writers Akwaeke Emezi, Mariame Kaba, N. K. Jemisin, Kai Cheng Thom, Nnedi Okorafor, and Rivers Solomon have shaped our thinking about the necessary revolutionary process that abolition requires. For example, Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet*, a book aimed at middle-schoolers, follows the story of 15-year old Jam, a young Black, a selectively mute trans girl who lives in Lucille, a city run by angels and free of

monsters. Jam accidentally conjures a monstrous creature from her mother's art one evening—the titular 'Pet'. However, readers learn that this creature—however monstrous—has arrived to do the work of angels; it is there to hunt a monster in Lucille. This monster turns out to be Jam's best friend's uncle, who has been sexually abusing his nephew. While deeply entrenched in fantastical elements, *Pet* raises questions about how harm is enacted and what safety looks like in a post-abolitionist utopia, and what happens "when you think you've been without monsters for so long, sometimes you forget what they look like."<sup>83</sup>

Another work of abolitionist fiction that could inform future film and television productions is "Justice," a nine-page short story written by Mariame Kaba and illustrated by Bianca Diaz. In "Justice," readers are introduced to a sixteen-year-old protagonist named Adila, who lived in Small Place (SP) and was recently murdered by an out-of-town visitor from Earth. The Earth Visitor kills Adila because she cannot believe that there are no prisons in SP. There are no prisons or jails because, in the SP, there is no such thing as bad people, only people who do bad things; thus, SP's leadership focuses on repairing harm rather than punishing people. Additionally, the SP is a place where mothers can be men, fathers can have no gender, and gender does not affect anyone's likelihood of experiencing harm. In SP, there are peace holders whose responsibility is "to make sure that all of our conflicts are swiftly and peacefully addressed."<sup>84</sup> In SP, harm is understood as an act against the community, not an individual; thus, all issues are addressed in community circles. Moreover, there is no such thing as private property in SP, and basic needs (including shelter, health care, and education) are guaranteed for all. That Kaba can create such a powerful, imaginative vision of a future life, providing many (though of course, not all) of the answers to what a world without prisons could look like in nine pages is impressive, and calls us to ask what she could do with more time and resources. Kaba's story ends with the SP community spending weeks celebrating Adila's life and requiring the Earth Visitor to partake in the celebrations before Adila's family chooses between letting the Earth Visitor die or having her take Adila's place in the community. They choose the latter. When faced with the concept of abolition, many individuals initially respond with questions such as "what about the murderers? What about the rapists?"<sup>85</sup> We believe that through drawing inspiration from the work of Kaba, Emezi, and other speculative fiction writers, film and television creators have the opportunity to address such questions and to craft content that supports the Movement for Black Lives. For example, what if HBO's *Watchmen* depicted Detective Abar recognizing the harms imposed by herself and her law enforcement colleagues—reflecting the narrative of one of its own writers— and using her newfound superpowers to crumble prisons and police precincts? What if other fictional television shows with law enforcement characters presented quitting the force as the best thing a police officer can do? It is through crafting abolitionist endings such as these that Hollywood creatives can help audiences envision the possibilities of an abolitionist world and embrace their responsibility to "make revolution irresistible."<sup>86</sup>

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## "Revolution of Thought and Action": W. E. B. Du Bois's World Search for Abolition Democracy

by Anthony Obst | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022)

**ABSTRACT** In recent years, scholars and activists have brought renewed attention to W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of abolition democracy. Initially coined in *Black Reconstruction* (1935), to describe both a political movement and a democratic ideal, abolition democracy has been taken up theoretically by Angela Davis, Allegra McLeod, and others to describe the ongoing process of dismantling global capitalism's political, racial, gender, and economic hierarchies, alongside the simultaneous creation of reconstructed social relations, institutions, and practices governed by universal democratic participation, instead of by force. This article suggests that Du Bois continues to draw on abolition democracy as a conceptual framework in his post-*Black Reconstruction* work. Tracing the outlines of this framework in his unpublished manuscript *A World Search for Democracy*, I demonstrate how for Du Bois, the question of democracy remains fundamentally tied to the ongoing legacies of slavery. As he continues to draw on the Reconstruction era as an historical example, Du Bois gives further shape to the idea of abolition as a process in the *present* (rather than an event in the past). In doing so, he recuperates the unfulfilled promise of abolition democracy as a theoretical and practical model for considering alternatives modes of citizenship beyond the material, ideal, and embodied limits of liberal bourgeois democracy. Accordingly, I argue, in *World Search*, we can see the outlines of abolition democracy as a three-fold project: political-economic, epistemic, and affective. Each section of this article sheds light on one of these dimensions, drawing on theoretical models from Nancy Fraser, Sylvia Wynter, Sara Ahmed, and Dylan Rodríguez. By thus abstracting the concept of abolition democracy further from the historical movement analyzed in *Black Reconstruction*, I propose that Du Bois's *World Search* offers lessons that can inform abolitionist theory and praxis today.

**KEYWORDS** Black studies, radical politics, fascism, history, democracy, abolition

In a letter to the publisher Alfred Harcourt, dated February 11, 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois outlines his plans for a book he is close to finishing at the time. On the heels of his



monumental historical study, *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois's ambitions are yet again grand: "I want to see how far I can induce Democracy, Fascism, and Communism to speak the same language and to draw into the picture the colored peoples of the world."<sup>1</sup> The book project that would come to be titled *A World Search for Democracy* never fully materialized. To this day it remains unpublished and exists only as a partial manuscript in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Part-epistolary novel, part-philosophical treatise, its largest coherent segment contains 104 hand-numbered pages counting up to 128, and includes a table of contents indicating at least three chapters missing from the original manuscript, parts of which are included in the archive in fragmentary form.<sup>2</sup> As the first book project Du Bois took up after the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, it deserves further scrutiny, especially for scholars interested in Du Bois's thoughts on democracy, fascism, and Communism during the 1930s.

*A World Search for Democracy* takes the form of a letter exchange between its two main characters, Abraham Lincoln Jones and Jane Kent. Rather than seeing either one or both of these characters as immediate mouth-pieces for Du Bois's political theory, I suggest that the form of the epistolary novel offers the affordance of a sort of testing ground for new ideas. As McLeod notes, "Writing a novel through the voices of two fictional characters gives Du Bois the chance to play a bit with ideas that would have been tricky to present in his usual writing forms."<sup>3</sup> Both characters exhibit a degree of overlap with the biographies of Du Bois and his future wife, Shirley Graham, who at the time was just appointed head of the fine arts department at an arts and industrial (A&I) state college in Nashville, Tennessee. Jones and Jane (as they are referred to in the manuscript for short), are both lecturers at the fictional Hartwell A&I College, described as "a conservative orthodox institution for Negro youth," located close to the South Carolina border in rural Georgia.<sup>4</sup> The plot is put in motion in the first chapter, when Jones is asked to take an unpaid leave of absence by the college president over remarks Jones made in a lecture. When a student asks him whether democracy currently exists anywhere in the world, he responds, hesitatingly, "I do not know. I used to know. I was quite certain. But today I am puzzled. . . . I know it exists, but where and in just what form—that I do not know, and I want to find out. Something has happened to the world and to me, and I feel like undertaking a new search—a sort of voyage of discovery."<sup>5</sup>

This voyage of discovery charts the course for the novel: *World Search* traces Jones and Jane's correspondence as he travels to different places around the world, including England, France, Germany, Russia, China, and Japan, assessing the state of democracy in each country as he comes to experience it.<sup>6</sup> Jane responds with her own observations on government practices in the United States, including committees, schools, local government, and national government. In between what mostly reads like a missive of democratic theory, a half-convincing love story unfolds, in which the two characters

develop a longing for each other over the physical distance between them. At the end of the novel, Jones and Jane reunite in Honolulu, Hawaii, and plot out their future life together as a married couple struggling to make ends meet.

The journey undertaken by the fictional character Jones mirrors in part the real-life journey undertaken by his author, W. E. B. Du Bois, in 1936.<sup>7</sup> As early as 1931, Du Bois had applied to the Oberlaender Trust of the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation to conduct research in Germany – where, as is widely known, he had spent three semesters as a graduate student at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin from 1892 to 1894, before acquiring his Ph.D. from Harvard University. While Du Bois's renewed sojourn to Germany was initially planned as a study "of the attitude of the German people since the World War toward the problem of world peace," the political situation in Germany was far from peaceful by the time Du Bois would actually set out on his journey on June 5, 1936.<sup>8</sup> Berlin, where Du Bois spent a significant part of his trip, was already in the thralls of one of the most ostentatious displays ever of Nazi propaganda, the 1936 Summer Olympics, which took place from August 1–16.<sup>9</sup>

Although I will return to Du Bois's writing on Nazi Germany at the end of this article, my main concern (to begin with) is of a different nature. I am interested in Du Bois's "curiosity for the plight of democracy," not simply in Germany but "in the world," as he phrases it in the explanatory note that prefaces the *World Search* manuscript<sup>10</sup>—especially against the backdrop of the historical research on the U.S. Civil War and the Reconstruction era, which he completed just prior to his 1936 world travels.

## Abolition Democracy as Concept

I propose that *World Search* stands out as a particularly comprehensive example among those texts written by Du Bois in his "*Black Reconstruction* era,"<sup>11</sup> in which he formulates his thoughts on how to approach the project of reconstructing democracy in a moment of capitalist and democratic crisis. Put differently, I suggest that the *concept* of abolition democracy—which Du Bois sketches theoretically alongside his historical study of the *political movement* of abolition democracy in *Black Reconstruction*—can be seen to take further shape in Du Bois's late 1930s work.<sup>12</sup> In writing *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois found that the promise of true democracy appeared only briefly in the history of the United States. In the period after the Civil War, newly freed enslaved people claimed and enforced their right to vote, built democratic institutions such as public schools from the ground up, and worked towards establishing equitable approaches to industry. However, counter-revolutionary forces, driven ideologically by white supremacy and economically by a demand for profit, soon intervened in what Du Bois described as "a determined effort to

reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation.”<sup>13</sup> What Du Bois grapples with retrospectively in his text is thus the lost promise of abolition democracy during the re-entrenched reign of racial capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Through his historical engagement with the international aftermath of the U.S. Civil War—i.e. the expansion of Euro-American empire and colonialism throughout the world—he comes to understand racial capitalism as the antithesis of a democratic ideal, which he views as attainable only under a fundamental restructuring of economic and social relations. If, as C. L. R. James once suggested, the crucial contribution of *Black Reconstruction* was to show how Black people in particular “had tried to carry out ideas that went beyond the prevailing conceptions of bourgeois democracy,” Du Bois considered similarly expansive ideas to also be crucial for the 1930s conjuncture.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Du Bois does not use the term in *World Search*, I propose that abolition democracy provides a useful analytical framework to trace his political thought in the manuscript—especially from a vantage point today in which activists and scholars have given the framework renewed critical currency and expanded its meaning—starting with Angela Davis’s influential publication *Abolition Democracy* (2005).<sup>16</sup> As a tradition of critique and praxis, abolitionist approaches to democracy aim for a radical reconstruction of political, economic, and social relations historically steeped in the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Through a core strategy which most activists and scholars trace back to *Black Reconstruction*, abolition democracy insists on the simultaneous dismantling of oppressive and exploitative structures, while working to build alternative structures for the common good, as determined through equal participation by the collective. In contrast to liberal democracy’s reliance on organized state violence and carceral institutions, abolition democracy’s collectivist program is not predicated on the repression and unfreedom of some. Grounded in a prefigurative politics of praxis, abolition democracy rejects gradualism and reformism as much as it rejects eschatological utopianism, insisting on the transformative potential of the here and now.

In this article, I trace the concept of abolition democracy as Du Bois continues to draw on it in his unpublished manuscript, *A World Search for Democracy*. I demonstrate how in this post-*Black Reconstruction* work, the question of democracy remains, for Du Bois, fundamentally tied to the ongoing legacies of slavery and the contemporary realities of colonialism. As he continues to draw on the Reconstruction era as an historical example, Du Bois gives further shape to the idea of abolition as a *process* in the *present* (rather than an *event* in the *past*). I propose that in doing so, he recuperates the unfulfilled promise of abolition democracy as a theoretical and practical model for considering alternative modes of citizenship beyond the material, ideal, and embodied limits of liberal bourgeois democracy. Accordingly, I argue, in *World Search*, we can see the outlines of abolition democracy as a three-fold project: political-economic, epistemic, and affective.<sup>17</sup> Each of

the following sections will shed light on one of these dimensions, drawing on theoretical models from Nancy Fraser, Sylvia Wynter, Sara Ahmed, and Dylan Rodríguez. By thus abstracting the concept of abolition democracy further from the historical movement as analyzed in *Black Reconstruction*, I propose that Du Bois's *World Search* offers lessons that can inform abolitionist theory and praxis today.

## *World Search's* Theory of the Commodification of Labor: Abolition Democracy as Political-Economic Project

If *Black Reconstruction* was Du Bois's attempt to read the history of the U.S. Civil War and its aftermath through a Marxist lens of historical analysis, *World Search* reads, in some parts, like his attempt to focus this lens on an analysis of contemporary political economies across various countries.<sup>18</sup> Jane expresses a popular Marxian maxim regarding base and superstructure that seems to permeate the novel's analytic in her first letter to Jones: "if you want to know a country, know the distribution of its income."<sup>19</sup> This world search for democracy, the reader learns, unfolds therefore from a decidedly materialist perspective: to get to the bottom of democracy's ills, one must examine the relations of production. Soon enough, Jones finds the question of political power to be fundamentally linked to the question of economic power. On his first stop in England, he encounters what he perceives to be an oligarchy in which a wealthy cadre of capitalists, colonialists, and aristocrats sets severe limits to the scope of the majority's democratic influence. "[I]n the ownership of accumulated wealth and division of income, there is little democratic control," Jones writes to Jane.<sup>20</sup> English democracy, he concludes, is thus only a democracy in name, restricting the means of participation largely to those who are propertied and white.

If political power is largely determined by economic power, this dynamic has a racialized history, as Jones illustrates in the novel's fourth chapter, "Jones on Democracy." He outlines how the economic power that fueled the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century and thus cemented itself politically was amassed by means of enslavement and colonialism: "The spread toward democratic equality forthwith meets opposition from the possessors of this economic power. This economic power was increased by geometric ratio in the 18th and 19th centuries because of the African slave trade, African slavery, and the black labor which was the foundation of the cotton kingdom."<sup>21</sup> Having amassed political power by economic means, the supposedly democratizing impulse of the bourgeois classes turned into an impulse of preserving power against those who remain excluded. Liberal democracy thus became a "stronghold against intrusion from without," a bulwark for the preservation of power instead of a mechanism for its even distribution.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Jones outlines a theory in which political power is, in effect, a function of economic power under the rule of racial capitalism.

What is to be done, then, about this fundamentally flawed distribution of power the world over? Interestingly, Jones points to a historical example where such an attempt was made successfully, even if tragically briefly.<sup>23</sup>

Only for a moment, in the United States of America in 1867, when four million black slaves had enfranchisement and the possibility of economic power added to their legal freedom, did the world trend set toward universal human development. Capitalism girded its loins. It swiftly nullified the Negro vote. It quickly warned Europe with terrible fiction concerning American Reconstruction. And in the meantime in both America and Europe capital set its house in order for a new conquest of the world.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Jones sums up the story of abolition democracy as Du Bois tells it in *Black Reconstruction*. The struggle for economic and political justice fought by formerly enslaved Black people in the South was violently defeated as part of a wave of white supremacist backlash that also precipitated the spread of Euro-American imperialism.<sup>25</sup> These forces, Jones argues in a polemical vocabulary, aligned themselves "in opposition not simply to national democracy, but to the appalling prospect of allowing primitive and half-civilized peoples and peoples with non-European types of culture, to act and think for themselves and share in government."<sup>26</sup> Such a vision, in which political and economic equality extends globally, would constitute what Jones calls a "world Renaissance, beside which the little European Renaissance would seem small and petty," and toward which the period of Reconstruction gestured.<sup>27</sup> As Jones suggests, this vision must take its cues from the unfulfilled promise of abolition democracy.

By connecting the historical struggle over abolition democracy with ongoing struggles over democratic participation the world over, Jones offers a perspective on "long abolition"<sup>28</sup> as an unfinished process. This perspective is underscored by Jones's theory of the commodification of labor, which he characterizes as the unresolved legacy of enslavement. As I will show in the following, his theory points to the suggestion that socialism might be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for democracy. If it is indeed the reckless, racialized reign of capital that has "ruined democracy," as Du Bois wrote in *Black Reconstruction*<sup>29</sup> (and as is once more suggested in this chapter on democracy), Jones traces the origin of this development back to a remarkable source. "The reason of all this," he writes, meaning the subjugation of democratic principles to economic motives,

was the making of the most important body of labor in the world into a mere commodity, and the influence of that commodity idea of labor upon the whole labor of the world. Still today black and colored labor is regarded as a means of wealth rather than as the object for which wealth is created. The shadow of this conception of labor lies over all white labor and will lay there until basic revolution of thought and action lifts it.<sup>30</sup>

The “commodity idea of labor” referenced here is not the Marxian idea of workers selling their labor-power on the market.<sup>31</sup> This logic of exploited labor under capitalism applies only to citizen-workers, who own their labor-power as political subjects.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Jones’s theory starts—to borrow Fred Moten’s words—“with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and ‘freedom.’”<sup>33</sup> While Marx posits a categorical difference between the “veiled” slavery of wage labor, in which the worker is forced to sell the labor-power that belongs to them as use-value, and slavery “pure and simple,” in which the worker supposedly sells their labor-power “once and for all,”<sup>34</sup> and which is superseded in teleological fashion, Jones’s theory complicates such a categorical and temporal distinction.<sup>35</sup> Further, he troubles the idea of labor-power being sold at all. The carceral logic of *capture* obliterates the logic of labor-power being *sold*. What underpins Jones’s theory of the commodification of labor, then, is not a relation of exploitation, but rather one of expropriation, in which “black and colored labor” remains barred from the status of citizen-worker.<sup>36</sup> In this analytic, the exploited labor of industrial capitalism appears not as the succession of the expropriated labor of the slavery economy. Instead, both of these modes appear as part and parcel of one political-economic regime: racial capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

As Nancy Fraser writes, “the social division between the exploited and the expropriated does not arise simply from capitalism’s economy. It is produced, rather, at the intersection of the system’s economic logic with its political order.”<sup>38</sup> Fraser argues that political subjectivation is key to understanding the logic of expropriation: public powers codify the status hierarchies “that distinguish citizens from subjects,” thereby “marking off groups subject to brute expropriation from those destined for ‘mere’ exploitation.”<sup>39</sup> For Fraser, then, “racialization in capitalist society appears at the point where a hierarchy of political statuses meets an amalgamation of disparate mechanisms of accumulation.”<sup>40</sup> The distinction between subjects of exploitation and subjects of expropriation appears, therefore, as what Du Bois elsewhere called the “color line.”<sup>41</sup> Fraser’s framework draws attention to the political powers that underwrite accumulation—and makes the case that the racialized production of subjects of expropriation is a structural feature deeply embedded in capitalism’s functioning as an “*institutionalized social order*.”<sup>42</sup> This framework draws attention to the necessarily political-economic character of abolition

democracy: democratized relations of production must be underpinned by non-hierarchical political relations and vice versa. Importantly, however, Jones's call for a "revolution of *thought* and action" also highlights the necessarily *epistemic* character of abolition democracy that strictly political-economic models either mask or deprioritize.<sup>43</sup> To fully lift the shadow of the commodity idea of expropriated human labor, such a revolution must also abolish the episteme that makes possible the disposability of hierarchically ordered human life.

## Toward a New Humanism? Abolition Democracy as Epistemic Project

This epistemic dimension is elucidated when we turn to Jones's analysis of the historical relation between liberal democracy and racial capitalism. "The demand for freedom which burst in the French Revolution was primarily the demand of those who were making profits on the buying and selling of labor as a commodity and only secondarily the demand of the poor for higher standards of living," he writes.<sup>44</sup> This "new set of capitalists, who thus came to power," Jones continues, "and who represented the new equality among men, who insisted on and took increasing freedom of thought and action themselves, in self defense of their new economic prosperity began unconsciously and deliberately to establish their democracy as a stronghold against intrusion from without."<sup>45</sup> In previously citing parts of this passage, I focused on its political-economic implications of such "intrusion." However, another layer opens up if we examine its implied notion of humanism through the decolonial lens provided by Sylvia Wynter.

The "new equality among men" that this class stood for was the equality among those permitted not merely into the political sphere of democracy, but more broadly into the epistemic realm of a humanism predicated on the model of *homo oeconomicus*—a specific *genre* of the human, as Wynter phrases it. Wynter's work provides a useful analytical toolbox with which to describe what I take Jones to be getting at here. For Wynter, the political-economic project of Western liberalism is intimately tied to a liberal-economic conception of humanism in which "the human" is understood not "ecumenically" but rather exclusively, in the genre-specific terms of the *homo oeconomicus* ideal.<sup>46</sup> As Katherine McKittrick writes in her introduction to Wynter's work: "We presently live in a moment where the human is understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script that governs our global well-being/ill-being—a script, therefore, whose macro-origin story calcifies the *hero figure* of *homo oeconomicus* who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom."<sup>47</sup> Because of the history of slavery, empire, and colonialism, this epistemic order imposed

itself as the dominant script for what it means to be human, relegating non-Western, non-male genres to various realms of the non-human, sub-human, or not-quite-human.<sup>48</sup>

Within this episteme, what is good for homo oeconomicus appears to be what is good for humans in general. In a world ruled by capitalism, the economic conception of being human is the imperative for the reproduction of this world. "This is why," Wynter remarks in an interview with David Scott,

however much abundance we can produce, we cannot solve the problem of poverty and hunger. Since the goal of our mode of production is *not* to produce for human beings in general, it's to provide the material conditions of existence for the production and reproduction of our present conception of being human: to secure the well-being, therefore, of those of us, the global middle classes, who have managed to attain to its ethno-class criterion.<sup>49</sup>

When Jones, in his letter on democracy, points to the years between 1776 and 1789—naming, besides the French Revolution, also the Declaration of Independence, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as crucial markers of this period<sup>50</sup>—he alludes to what Wynter calls "the intellectual revolution of liberal or economic humanism."<sup>51</sup> Because at the heart of this intellectual revolution (this is the analytic that I see Jones sharing with Wynter) lies the consolidation of not only a political order built to protect the profits and power dynamics generated through an economic system based on slavery and colonialism, but also the epistemic framework that enables a categorical differentiation between those human beings able to freely participate in these systems, and those to be bought and sold as laboring commodities. If "real democracy", as Jane suggests early on in the novel, "is based upon the widest recognition of human equality," then how can it be achieved within the parameters of homo oeconomicus's exclusive, genre-specific humanism?<sup>52</sup> For Wynter, this kind of achievement is impossible without an intellectual revolution on the scale of the eighteenth century's—that is, without ushering in the epistemic order of a new humanism.<sup>53</sup>

At times, Du Bois's novel gestures similarly toward something like a new humanism that is entwined with its democratic ideal. In her very first letter to Jones, Jane espouses an ideal of worldwide democracy that draws on "a new and magnificent humanity, on which a new world can be built."<sup>54</sup> Finally, in *World Search*'s ultimate chapter, this humanistic idea comes more explicitly to the fore, once again voiced by Jane:



The mechanical dictatorship of the proletariat may bring a socialist state with rising wages and the possibility of democratic control but it also will bring to the front ruthless men of ability, greedy of power and first thing comes Thermidor—comes the substitution; comes the transformation of dictatorship that represents the mass and to a dictatorship that represents itself. And although this second state is not as bad as the first, it calls for more revolution. Now I do not suppose that all this can be avoided. Perhaps we shall go from economic incarnation to reincarnation until the bureaucratic socialistic state dissolves into the democratic state of men who are willing to have other men their equals. But I do not think that even that will occur unless we stress more and work more for the feeling of equality and good will, and desire for other people to become men even as we are. Not even Trotsky's universal communistic revolution is going to provide automatically for this kind of man.<sup>55</sup>

Jane here addresses a fundamental problem for revolutionary theory and praxis: How can political, economic, and social relations be rearranged without ushering in ever-new waves of despotism?<sup>56</sup> She also raises a central question for abolition democracy: How to construct a new world from within the—material and conceptual—limits of the old? Jane suggests that this is not simply a question of political economy, but rather a question of humanism, or rather, over who “counts” as human in the epistemic order. While a socialist mode of production might constitute one prerequisite for a truly democratic society in Jane's sense, this material revolution must also be accompanied by an epistemic revolution that does not automatically follow.<sup>57</sup>

Where Jane's theory differs from Wynter's is in its aspirational reliance on the mechanisms (and possibilities) of inclusion and uplift. Rather than advocating for a genuinely new humanism, Jane's argument still makes the case for “excluded others” to be incorporated into the prevailing model (“to become men even as we are”). Thus, we see even in the terminology as voiced through the character of Jane a reproduction of the patriarchal language of Man, overdetermined as the language of humanity-as-such. Jane's political vision does not fully articulate the horizon of a new humanism. Yet the sentiment voiced by Jane strikes a note that resonates with Wynter's insights.<sup>58</sup> This, I will suggest in the following section, is particularly illuminated by honing in on the affective dimension of *World Search's* vision of abolition democracy.

## Inhabiting Insurgent Being: Abolition Democracy as Affective Project

As Jane suggests in the passage quoted above, it is “the *feeling* of equality and good will” that needs to circulate widely in her vision of a democratic society's affective economy—even with, and in addition to, the abolition of capitalism's political economy.<sup>59</sup> Sara Ahmed's framework of affective economies is helpful here in underscoring that “emotions

*do things*, and they align individuals with communities.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than reducing emotions to psychological dispositions, Ahmed suggests that emotions “mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”<sup>61</sup> Lauren Berlant foregrounds the reciprocity between affective and political economies when they write that “citizenship’s legal architecture manifests itself and is continually reshaped in the space of transactions between intimates and strangers.”<sup>62</sup> I read Jane’s remark, then, as a recognition of the affective ties of citizenship, in which to *feel* equal with and good will toward one’s fellow citizens would necessarily have to underpin—and, in turn, be supported by—a society’s political-economic infrastructure.

Jane’s expression echoes an earlier observation shared in the chapter titled “Jane on American Negroes,” where she proposes that with “an increasing number of men of real benevolence and good-will . . . we are going to make a new world.”<sup>63</sup> These instances speak to the prominent role Jane attributes to a certain kind of affect that her democratic vision demands. Thus we could say that Jane adds the notion of a revolution of feeling to Jones’s call for a revolution of thought and action as critical components of abolition democracy’s reconstructive project. Rather than reading Jane’s commitment to good-will as a form of Kantian ethics, in which this notion is grounded in the false universal of Man,<sup>64</sup> I want to suggest that there is, in fact, a more radical affective politics at play here. To do so, I will first point out the difference between Jane’s affective politics and a canonical account of liberal affective politics. Then, I will show how Jones insists on anchoring affective politics in everyday, embodied practices. Taken together, I propose that both characters’ positions add up to what Dylan Rodríguez has termed “abolition as praxis of human being.”<sup>65</sup>

In *Political Emotions*, the liberal philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that what she calls “positive feelings” such as love, sympathy, respect, etc.—grounded in a shared sense of morality and good—can serve as a stabilizing force across democratic forms of government.<sup>66</sup> Nussbaum views it as liberal democracy’s task to cultivate such positive feelings among its citizens, in order not to cede “the terrain of emotion-shaping to antiliberal forces,” which could have a destabilizing effect on society.<sup>67</sup> But should we see Jane’s focus on feelings of benevolence, equality, and good will simply as efforts to stabilize society? Does her commitment to positive feelings betray a commitment to liberal democracy after all, perhaps even one shared by her author?<sup>68</sup>

I want to suggest instead that the concept of abolition democracy can help us arrive at a more nuanced answer to these questions. For if we draw the first part of the term into our analysis, we shall see a range of more ambiguous “negative feelings” opened up through the project of abolition democracy: Consider the indignation that surfaces in Jane’s passages on local government, deeply mired in the state of Georgia in anti-Black law-

making and practices, or the outrage she expresses over the range of discrimination and disenfranchisement pertaining to her discussions of national government.<sup>69</sup> Consider also her rather direct call to rebel, complain, and agitate in this passage, which I take to reference the Declaration of Independence, the end of Reconstruction, and the passing of Plessy v. Ferguson: "American democracy born in 1776, was wounded to death in 1876, and given the coup-de-grace in 1894. Why not rebel, complain to heaven and honest men? Why not agitate, arouse, form a new party and sweep county, state and nation into a crusade for new democracy, new civic righteousness, real reform?"<sup>70</sup>

Jane's words serve as a stinging reminder that Du Bois and his fictional characters were practically disfranchised in the Jim Crow South at the time he wrote this book.<sup>71</sup> The affective ties of (white) citizenship in 1930s America thus served to strengthen a legal infrastructure predicated on (Black) exclusion. While Nussbaum might be right in pointing out the necessity of "positive feelings" for democratic projects, the faith she has in Western liberal democracy is not reflected in *World Search*. The emotions expressed in Jane's letters instead suggest a more complex affective economy embedded in her democratic theory. The "positive" side of abolition democracy's affective politics – feelings of good will, equality, and benevolence – is shown as necessarily entwined with its negative side – indignation, agitation, and outrage. This "negative" side resonates with Andrew Dilts and Perry Zurn's description of "abolitionist affect" as a feeling of "active intolerance" toward practices and conditions that are intolerable.<sup>72</sup> "Active intolerance," they write, "takes aim at all those sites where discipline and oppression effectively silence and subjugate."<sup>73</sup> While Dilts and Zurn highlight the prison as an exemplary disciplinary institution, Jane's feelings of active intolerance are directed at the confining, oppressive structures of Jim Crow *Herrenvolk* democracy. If, as Dilts and Zurn suggest, "pursuing an array of abolitionist alternatives is an everyday activity and way of living," such an embodied affective activity is, finally, also mirrored in *World Search*.<sup>74</sup>

"How shall we get him, Jones?" Jane asks, in the last chapter, regarding the kind of "man" required for the new democratic world they envision.<sup>75</sup> In Jones's answer, we find the theoretical trace of an embodied praxis: "We shall only get him, Jane, by being him; that is, reformers must be willing to be equals."<sup>76</sup> I propose to read this suggestion (which, arguably, provides something like the moral of the *World Search* story) as an imperative akin to the scholar-activist Dylan Rodríguez's call to inhabit a mode of "insurgent being"—or abolition as praxis of human being.<sup>77</sup> Drawing on Wynter, Rodríguez suggests that there is an embodied praxis to be found (and, in fact, to be inhabited) in what he calls the "global abolitionist genealogy," i.e. the long tradition of resistance to Western Man's civilizational project, including its political, economic, social, and epistemic orders.<sup>78</sup> This tradition of Black, indigenous, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and other modes of resistance that challenge the hegemonic orders of homo oeconomicus provides a counter-model to this

order's liberal futurity that masks as universal. For Rodríguez, "it is possible to *inhabit* abolitionist futurity through already-existing human praxis," thus drawing on the tradition that has long imagined modes of being human not tied to the homo oeconomicus imperative of accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom.<sup>79</sup> If, as Rodríguez writes, "abolitionism articulates a fundamental critique of existing systems of oppression while *attempting to actively imagine as it practices forms of collective power that are liberated from hegemonic paradigms*," then such a praxis can be found theorized in Du Bois's *World Search for Democracy*.<sup>80</sup> Practicing forms of collective power liberated from hegemonic paradigms aptly describes the ongoing political project of abolition democracy. In Du Bois's unpublished 1937 manuscript, he takes up this project as the unfinished legacy of the historical movement he details in *Black Reconstruction*. Through the characters Jane and Jones, he reflects on the material, ideal, and embodied limits of liberal bourgeois citizenship. In doing so, he builds on the concept of abolition democracy to explore its political-economic, epistemic, and affective dimensions—articulating it, finally, as a praxis of human being.

## Coda: Jones on Germany

Two years before Du Bois set sail for Germany in 1936, he had resigned from his position at the NAACP—fueled, in part, by his increasing move to the left and his loss of confidence in the project of national inclusion. As Nikhil Pal Singh has noted, Du Bois's program of separate Black economic cooperatives, which he developed in response to the failings of New Deal policy, marked a turn away from "the liberal-democratic faith that had guided and sustained black struggles in the United States since Reconstruction."<sup>81</sup> His resignation also meant that Du Bois had no access to *The Crisis*, the publishing organ so clearly associated with his voice for close to twenty-five years. Over the course of his world travels, Du Bois instead wrote a column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the leading Black weekly newspapers at the time. In this column under the heading "Forum of Fact and Opinion," readers can find astute observations and clear condemnations of the racial violence carried out by the Nazi regime, particularly on its Jewish population. Du Bois's first report in the *Courier* after leaving Germany, on December 5, 1936, unambiguously states: "There is a campaign of race prejudice carried on, openly, continuously and determinedly against all non-Nordic races, but specifically against the Jews, which surpasses in vindictive cruelty and public insult anything I have ever seen; and I have seen much."<sup>82</sup>

In the *World Search* manuscript, however, such observations are, for the most part, strikingly absent. At least two thirds of the chapter "Jones on Germany" (which is one of the chapters missing from the original manuscript) do not actually deal with Germany at all, consisting instead of much more general observations on government. This, I propose, is

because the purpose of this chapter is not actually to shed light on Germany. For better or worse, I argue, *World Search* de-exceptionalizes the fascism of Nazi Germany in order to make a world-historical argument against various forms of white supremacist, capitalist government. As Alberto Toscano has noted, Du Bois was among those Black radical thinkers in the 1930s who "sought to expand the historical and political imagination of an antifascist left by detailing how what from a European or white vantage point could be perceived as a radically new form of ideology and violence was in effect continuous with the history of colonial dispossession and racial slavery."<sup>83</sup>

The chapter begins with a set of telling questions which set out how Jones views the problem of government very broadly, and which once again pivot on his insight that "humanity" is a constructed, rather than a self-evidently universal category. Jones writes, "The crucial question of government is: How far is the State being conducted for the best interests of Mankind?"<sup>84</sup>, ca. 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), box 225, 1.] He follows this up with a similarly crucial question that illustrates the central dilemma that *World Search* highlights: "Are the interests of the White world and the World at Large antagonistic?"<sup>85</sup> Du Bois, at the very least, contends in this novel with the possibility that this is, in fact, the case. Aligned, historically, with capital—as argued in other parts of *World Search*—white supremacy is one of the ideological forces through which the West's oligarchies and *Herrenvolk* democracies maintain their power. Jones's line of questioning thus continues: If government is conducted by a powerful group, "is it clear, that the interests of mankind, and not the interests of their group is the object and the continuing object of the endeavors? Who decides between the special interests of the group and the interests of humanity?"<sup>86</sup>

In these rhetorical questions, I read a thinly veiled critique of Western liberal democracy along the lines I outlined following Sylvia Wynter's critique of liberal humanism. Jones is suggesting that governments ruled by white supremacy and capital only purport to be acting in the best interest of mankind. Wynter helps us understand that this is made possible through the homo oeconomicus conception of mankind instituting itself as the definition of Man. This insight leads Jones on a similar quest for a new humanism: "Is there, or can there be conceived, a humanity whose collective interests, regardless of class, race, or nation, are or should be paramount in the world?"<sup>87</sup> If this follows neatly from the discussion I outlined previously, it is because it constitutes one of the central propositions of Du Bois's novel: The political question of *democracy-for-whom* is inseparably intertwined with the epistemic question of *humanity-for-whom*.

*World Search* makes clear that what Jones finds in Germany is not democracy, but rather a military dictatorship that governs by ruthless authority and tireless, hate-filled propaganda. Yet, this fictional visitor suggests that the dictatorial form of government shares a similar

concern to the forms of government he finds elsewhere in Europe and the United States: "The desperate and continued effort of individual and group interests to use the State for their own ends, wishes and purposes, with the assumption that this is natural, historical, and logical, and calls for no defense save that it works and is patently beneficial to a few."<sup>88</sup> If this is something like the lowest denominator that Nazi Germany and Jim Crow America hold in common, Du Bois emphasizes elsewhere that he perceives also crucial differences. In a March 1937 letter to the American Jewish Committee, in which he clarifies comments that he made to the *New York Staatszeitung und Herald*, Du Bois writes:

while I was in Germany the Nazi[s] had so changed the laws that practically anything they did to Jews was legal, and what you had was legal oppression rather than the illegal cast[e] and lynching of Negroes in the United States. On the other hand the difference between these two methods is not essential, but it does make direct comparison between the plight of the Negroes in America and the Jews in Germany difficult and in many respects misleading.<sup>89</sup>

While Du Bois is correct to assert the difficulty of direct comparison, he misrecognizes that both of these modes of oppression do, in historical fact, overlap. It is precisely in the twinning of legal and extra-legal violence that fascism rears its ugly head. This is what Du Bois so jarringly memorializes in *Black Reconstruction's* second-to-last chapter, "Back Toward Slavery." As evidenced by the vigilante violence unleashed by the Ku-Klux-Klan and other self-organized white terrorist organizations in the wake of Reconstruction—as well as by the anti-Semitic pogroms carried out in Nazi Germany in the years following Du Bois's visit—fascism depends on the deputization of civilians to carry out the interests of the state.<sup>90</sup> In the US context, as Geo Maher has argued, the lines between legal and extra-legal violence have never been clearly drawn, which has deeply entrenched an inflated notion of who or what constitutes police in the structure of American society.<sup>91</sup> For abolitionist politics today, then, it is important to recognize this fascist potential as not simply bound to the organized violence of the state. A heuristic of fascisms in the plural, as suggested by Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo, can perhaps help to balance and productively retain this tension—between, for instance, Nazi Germany's decidedly *anti-liberal* fascism and the fascist potentials at the heart of liberal democracy.<sup>92</sup> Such a heuristic could also help expand on the connection between viewing "fascism and its corollaries as responses to anticolonial revolution, abolitionist worldmaking, and the escalating crises of capitalism accumulation,"<sup>93</sup> and grasping "abolitionist living [as] anti-fascist living."<sup>94</sup> That is to say, while Du Bois has trouble interpreting fascism from the perspective of "long abolition," those difficulties can productively inform contemporary discussions about the necessary link between abolition and anti-fascism—but also about the *distinct* challenges that *different* fascisms might pose for the project of abolition democracy

# Notes

1. W. E. B. Du Bois to Harcourt, Brace and Company, February 11, 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. ↩
2. I thank Lisa McLeod for sharing her notes from the physical archive with me and for helping me locate the missing chapter on Germany. Besides Nahum Dimitri Chandler, McLeod is one of only two scholars to have published any notable research on the manuscript. See Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "A Persistent Parallax: On the Writings of W. E. Burghardt Du Bois on Japan and China, 1936–1937," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 291–316; and Lisa McLeod, "Du Bois's 'A World Search for Democracy': The Democratic Roots of Socialism," *Socialism and Democracy* 32, no. 3 (November 2018): 105–124. Nick Bromell, in his helpful outline of what is mostly the early Du Bois's democratic theory, opens his article with a scene from *World Search* but does not discuss it further. Nick Bromell, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Enlargement of Democratic Theory," *Raritan* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 140–161. Other influential studies on Du Bois and democracy often make no mention of the manuscript at all, e.g. Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). ↩
3. McLeod, "Democratic Roots," 106. ↩
4. W. E. B. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, ca. 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 1. ↩
5. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 1. ↩
6. Since Nahum Chandler, in "A Persistent Parallax" analyzes the chapters on Japan and China at length, I will not discuss these here. The chapter on Russia is missing from the original manuscript. ↩
7. For more on how Du Bois's semi-autobiographical personae often permeate his fiction, see Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, "The Black Flame Revisited: Recursion and Return in the Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's Trilogy," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 2 (2015): 157–169, <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.15.2.0157> <<https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.15.2.0157>>. For more on Du Bois's journey, see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 388–421. ↩
8. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Oberlaender Trust application, May 1931," W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. ↩
9. See also Werner Sollors, "W. E. B. Du Bois in Nazi Germany, 1936," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 44, no. 2 (1999): 207–222. As a way of positioning myself in this research, I want to note that this specter of Nazi propaganda loomed large over my childhood, as I grew up a ten-minute walk away from Berlin's *Olympiastadion*. ↩
10. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, ii. ↩
11. Charisse Burden-Stelly has evocatively used this term to describe the years leading up to *Black Reconstruction*, from 1933 until its publication in 1935, though I would suggest extending this periodization to include later publications that reflect some of the same concerns. See also Charisse Burden Stelly (with Gerald Horne), "From Black Reconstruction to Black Liberation: The Radicalization of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, 1931–1961," Personal blog, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.charisseburdenstelly.com/blog/4-the-vagaries-of-the-edited-volume> <<https://www.charisseburdenstelly.com/blog/4-the-vagaries-of-the-edited-volume>>. ↩
12. For a discussion of this distinction between concept and political movement, see Robert Gooding-Williams in "Abolition 2/13: Abolition Democracy," October 15, 2020, <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/abolition1313/2-13-abolition-democracy> <<http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/abolition1313/2-13-abolition-democracy>>. ↩
13. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 679. ↩

14. As Ralph and Singhal note, "Du Bois is often cited as providing the framework for 'racial capitalism,' though he never used the phrase." Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal, "Racial Capitalism," *Theory and Society* 48 (2019): 864. ↵
15. Quoted in Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 95. For more, see also Gary Wilder, "Reading Du Bois's Revelation: Radical Humanism and Black Atlantic Criticism," in *The Postcolonial Contemporary*, ed. Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 95–125; and Yuichiro Onishi and Toru Shinoda, "The Paradigm of Refusal: W. E. B. Du Bois's Transpacific Political Imagination in the 1930s" in *Citizen of the World: The Late Career and Legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 13–35. ↵
16. Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005). See also, for example, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Verso, 2022); Andrew Dilts, "Crisis, Critique, and Abolition," in *A Time for Critique*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt and Didier Fassin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 230–251; Allegra McLeod, "Envisioning Abolition Democracy," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (April 2019): 1613–1649; Dylan Rodríguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (April 2019): 1575–1612; Daniel Loick and Vanessa E. Thompson, *Abolitionism: Ein Reader* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022); Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Quinn Lester, "Whose Democracy in Which State?: Abolition Democracy from Angela Davis to W. E. B. Du Bois," in *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 7 (December 2021): 3081–3086. ↵
17. I thank a reviewer for suggesting the concept of citizenship as a way of bringing out the connection between these three elements more clearly. ↵
18. See also McLeod, "Democratic Roots," and Michael J. Saman, "Du Bois and Marx, Du Bois and Marxism," *Du Bois Review* 17, no. 1 (2020): 33–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1742058x20000089> <<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1742058x20000089>>. ↵
19. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 6. ↵
20. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 9. ↵
21. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 21. ↵
22. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 23. ↵
23. For a reading of how Du Bois inverts the tragic legend of Reconstruction, "showing how the real harm done to American democracy was not the rule of 'black Republicanism' but the reimposition of white supremacy," see Vijay Phulwani, "A Splendid Failure? Black Reconstruction and Du Bois's Tragic Vision of Politics," in *A Political Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Nick Bromell (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 272. ↵
24. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 25. ↵
25. See also Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 48. ↵
26. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 24. ↵
27. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 25. ↵
28. Dylan Rodríguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (April 2019): 1575–1612. ↵
29. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 30. ↵
30. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 26–27. ↵
31. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 274: "The capitalist epoch is therefore characterized by the fact that



- labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property; his labour consequently takes on the form of wage-labour." ↵
32. See also Nancy Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson," *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 163–178, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685814> < <https://doi.org/10.1086/685814>> . ↵
  33. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6. ↵
  34. Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 271. ↵
  35. Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 925: "the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world." See also Walter Johnson's reading of this passage. Walter Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question." *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 299–308, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812207231.149> < <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812207231.149>> . ↵
  36. See also Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 123. ↵
  37. Cedric Robinson famously made this point in his argument about *Black Reconstruction*. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 2000. 1983). ↵
  38. Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation," 170. ↵
  39. Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation," 170. ↵
  40. Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation," 172. ↵
  41. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903; New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968). ↵
  42. Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation," 173, emphasis in text. ↵
  43. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 27; emphasis added. In "The Paradigm of Refusal," Onishi and Shinoda show how Du Bois's idea that an epistemic revolution must complement a political-economic one also resonates with Toyohiko Kagawa's "Brotherhood Economics," which Du Bois was interested in at the time. ↵
  44. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 22. ↵
  45. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 23. ↵
  46. See, for example, Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 196; or Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 21. ↵
  47. McKittrick and Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 10; emphasis in text. ↵
  48. See also David Scott and Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe* 8, September 2000, 182. ↵
  49. Scott and Wynter, "Re-Enchantment," 160. "Ethno-class" here refers to the Western-bourgeois notion of humanism, see also "Re-Enchantment," 196. ↵
  50. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 22. ↵
  51. Scott and Wynter, "Re-Enchantment," 202. ↵
  52. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 17. ↵

53. Wynter also gestures to the work of Frantz Fanon with this notion, see, for instance, "Re-Enchantment," 95. ↵
54. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 7. ↵
55. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 125. ↵
56. This question becomes particularly relevant with regards to Stalin's Russia at the time of Du Bois's writing, and unfortunately, the chapter "Jones on Russia" is also missing from the extant manuscript. ↵
57. See also Wynter's perspective on this in "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 41. ↵
58. In other writings from around the time when he wrote *World Search*, Du Bois did gesture to such expansive horizons beyond inclusion—for instance, when he wrote in his column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* in April 1937, "We are fighting for universal equality . . . Not to become white men; not to become yellow men; but to become ourselves and to hold ourselves the equal of any." W. E. B. Du Bois, *Newspaper Columns*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, vol. 1: 1883–1944 (New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1986), 189. ↵
59. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 125; emphasis added. ↵
60. Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (79), (Summer 2004), 119, [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79-117](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117) < [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79-117](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117) >; emphasis in text. ↵
61. Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 119. ↵
62. Lauren Berlant, "Citizenship," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Third Edition*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 44. ↵
63. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 87. ↵
64. See also Charles Milles, "Kant's Untermenschen," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 169–193. ↵
65. Dylan Rodríguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (April 2019): 1575–1612. ↵
66. Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 2. For a critique of Nussbaum's clear-cut classification of good and bad emotions, see Jonas Bens et al., *The Politics of Affective Societies* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 15. ↵
67. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 2. ↵
68. For a philosophical recuperation of a Du Boisian, "Black radical liberalism," in contrast to orthodox, racialized liberalism, see Charles Mills, "W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Liberal," in *A Political Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Nick Bromell (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2018), 19–56. ↵
69. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 52, 69. ↵
70. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 57. Jane's reference is to 1894 and not to 1896, the year in which *Plessy v. Ferguson* was passed. Based on the fact that she appears to imply a connection between democracy's "wounding" and its "coup-de-grace," though, I take this connection to gesture to two significant dates of the Jim Crow era. ↵
71. McLeod, "Democratic Roots," 116. ↵
72. Andrew Dilts and Perry Zurn, "Affect, Active Intolerance, and Abolition," in *Theory & Event* 24, no. 2 (April 2021), 609. ↵
73. Dilts and Zurn, "Affect, Active Intolerance, and Abolition," 607. ↵
74. Dilts and Zurn, "Affect, Active Intolerance, and Abolition," 608. ↵

75. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 125. ↵
76. Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 125. While the term “reformer” may carry a certain kind of liberal connotation for us today, Jones uses it to describe a rather wide range of 1930s character types: “I have met . . . three classes of reformer: the revolutionist who things {sic} that everything is so bad that only immediate murder and destruction can begin new life. Then there is the critic to whom nothing is good but who depends with rare faith upon time to right things and does nothing now. And finally, there is the man of action who sees good and bad and wants to do something about it.” Du Bois, *A World Search for Democracy*, 122. ↵
77. Dylan Rodríguez, “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword,” *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (April 2019): 1575–1612. ↵
78. Rodríguez, “Abolition as Praxis,” 1609. ↵
79. Rodríguez, “Abolition as Praxis,” 1608; emphasis in text. ↵
80. Rodríguez, “Abolition as Praxis,” 1612; emphasis in text. ↵
81. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 59. ↵
82. Quoted in Sollors, “Du Bois in Nazi Germany,” 218. Sollors notes that Du Bois’s clear condemnation of Nazi Germany in the *Courier* begins only after he had left the country. Prior to that, his column included largely uncritical observations on opera, science, and (to a lesser extent) the Olympics. ↵
83. Alberto Toscano, “The Returns of Racial Fascism,” in *For Antifascist Futures: Against the Violence of Imperial Crisis*, ed. Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo (Brooklyn and Philadelphia: Common Notions, 2022), 246. ↵
84. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Jones on Germany [fragment ↵
85. Du Bois, “Jones on Germany,” 1. ↵
86. Du Bois, “Jones on Germany,” 2. ↵
87. Du Bois, “Jones on Germany,” 3. ↵
88. Du Bois, “Jones on Germany,” 3. ↵
89. W. E. B. Du Bois to American Jewish Committee, March 10, 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. ↵
90. See also Johanna Fernández, “On the Historical Roots of US Fascism,” in Goldstein and Trujillo, *For Antifascist Futures: Against the Violence of Imperial Crisis*, 43–52. For a development of the argument that what Du Bois identifies in the Reconstruction era is a form of “racial fascism,” see Amiri Baraka, “Black Reconstruction: Du Bois & the U.S. Struggle for Democracy & Socialism,” in *Conjunctions*, no. 29 (1997): 62–80. ↵
91. Geo Maher, *A World Without Police: How Strong Communities Make Cops Obsolete* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 19–23. I thank a reviewer for raising Maher’s work as a reference for this point. ↵
92. Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo, “Fascism Now? Inquiries for an Expanded Frame,” in Goldstein and Trujillo, *For Antifascist Futures: Against the Violence of Imperial Crisis*, 1–20. ↵
93. Goldstein and Trujillo, “Fascism Now?,” 19–20. ↵
94. Che Gossett, “Abolitionist Alternatives: Black Radicalism and the Refusal of Reform,” *Cabinet Magazine*, December 15, 2020, [https://cabinetmagazine.org/kiosk/gossett\\_che\\_15\\_december\\_2020.php](https://cabinetmagazine.org/kiosk/gossett_che_15_december_2020.php) < [https://cabinetmagazine.org/kiosk/gossett\\_che\\_15\\_december\\_2020.php](https://cabinetmagazine.org/kiosk/gossett_che_15_december_2020.php)>. ↵
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# Author Information

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Anthony Obst is a doctoral candidate at the Freie Universität Berlin's Graduate School of North American Studies. His dissertation traces an archive of abolitionist theory in Black radical writings from the 1930s. In 2022, he was a visiting research scholar at the CUNY Graduate Center.

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## "Companionship and a Little Fun": Investigating Working Women's Leisure Aboard a Hudson River Steamboat, July 1919

by Austin Gallas | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022)

**ABSTRACT** This article provides an in-depth consideration of a single report penned on the night of July 27, 1919 by a private detective employed by New York City's Committee of Fourteen (1905–1932), an influential anti-vice and police reform organization. A close reading of the undercover sleuth's account, which details his experiences, subjective judgments, and general observations regarding moral and social conditions while aboard the *Benjamin B. Odell*, a palatial Hudson River steamboat, enables us to enrich our grasp of the courtship and pleasure-seeking practices popular among working women and men active in New York City's heterosocial and largely segregated amusement landscape during the so-called "Red Summer." Specifically, the report reveals how wage-earning women articulated femininity and sought individual freedoms, companionship, pleasure, and romance via Hudson River steamboat excursions. The relatively unsupervised atmosphere of such trips was appealing to some working women because it represented an affordable way to attain companionship, prohibited forms of amusement and entertainment, and sexual gratification, a way that sidestepped many of the reputational hazards typically associated with the search for such goods among mainland leisure spaces. Such opportunities were particularly valuable given the crackdowns on public sexuality and late-night amusement spaces that had followed America's entry into World War I in 1917 and the advent of "wartime prohibition" on July 1, 1919. The article also supplies important contextual information required for proper appreciation of the investigation report in question, including a discussion of the methods and goals of the Committee of Fourteen and a brief overview of prior efforts by Progressive Era urban moral authorities to uncover and control "white slavery," gambling, and other "vices" witnessed aboard steamboat excursions operating in and around New York, Chicago, and other coastal cities.

**KEYWORDS** police, surveillance, New York City, sexuality, leisure, Progressive Era, women's history, vice

*[T]he boat is a floating piece of space . . . that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea . . . . The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.*

—Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/1985.01.31-Austin-Gallas.jpg> >

Figure 1. The steamer *Benjamin B. Odell*, docked at Rondout, New York. Used with permission from the Hudson River Maritime Museum.

Around six o'clock in the evening on July 27, 1919, an undercover investigator boarded the Hudson River Steamboat Company's palatial steamer, the *Benjamin B. Odell*, in Newburgh, New York.<sup>2</sup> As the *Odell* cruised down the Hudson River towards her destination, Manhattan's Franklin Street Pier 24, the investigator collected information regarding social relations aboard the steamer—anything that might be of interest to his employers, the members of New York City's Committee of Fourteen (COF, 1905–1932), a powerful, privately-funded police reform and anti-vice organization. He observed the crowd of some three-thousand working-class pleasure-seekers, watching how they danced and interacted with one another in the *Odell*'s saloon and on the dining and observation decks, and noting the behavior of the boat's musicians. He looked on as couples used her private staterooms for short intervals for apparently "immoral" purposes. He pumped the *Odell*'s crew for information, hoping to gain insights into the character of the vessel's typical passengers and to suss out any suspicious or illegal activities. And he succeeded in "picking up" two wage-earning women, both of whom were employed in Manhattan that summer. When the

*Ode//* reached its final stop, he disembarked with one of the women, who enlisted his help in procuring liquor illegally (since enforcement of wartime prohibition, which banned the production and sale of intoxicating beverages, had commenced on July 1) and invited him to surreptitiously visit her in her room at the Cambridge Hotel in Brooklyn.

This article considers the undercover investigator's written account of his experiences, reckonings, and observations aboard the crowded *Ode//* that night in late July 1919. A close reading of the report enriches our understanding of the practices of courtship and pleasure-seeking that punctuated the heterosocial, segregated spaces of working-class leisure and amusement in and around New York City during America's "Red Summer."<sup>3</sup>

The investigator's written account offers vital opportunities to examine how wage-earning women and adolescent girls carved out channels for attaining individual freedoms, love, companionship, and gratification in their leisure hours via weekend steamboat excursions on the Hudson, and how Progressive reformers monitored their activities in the hopes of securing new avenues of social control and bolstering systems of social protection. Consideration of the report reveals that the relatively unsupervised spaces afforded by steamboat excursions appealed to working women and girls partly because they offered access to desirable forms of male companionship and sexual satisfaction, minus many of the risks to reputation and disciplinary consequences that often accompanied the pursuit of such goods on the mainland.<sup>4</sup> The fact that steamboat excursions made forms of sexual, romantic, and social autonomy available to wage-earning women and girls (and, sometimes, much to the chagrin of authorities, to sex workers) for the price of a ticket plus rental fees is particularly salient in the context of this report, given wartime prohibition's onset just four weeks prior and, more broadly, given the intense escalation of efforts by various local, federal, and private authorities to surveil and control public sexuality in general, and "promiscuity" among wage-earning immigrant women and girls in particular, that crystallized in the lead-up to America's declaration of war in April 1917.<sup>5</sup>

As they became increasingly commercialized around the turn of the century, steamboat excursions offered wage-earning women and girls compelling opportunities for "flirtations and amusement, without the chaperonage of parents."<sup>6</sup> Hudson River steamboats, which since the 1850s had faced increasing competition with trains in the freight and personal transport business, continued to attract passengers in the early twentieth century by providing comfort, well-furnished private staterooms, and top-notch entertainment options. They were fitted with fine furniture, dining rooms, live music, spacious observation decks, and dance floors. Yet the price of fare remained low enough that most visitors and residents could enjoy the experience. An armada of steamboats was devoted solely to excursions, moonlight sails, and charters, and during the hot summer months especially, masses of working people utilized these boats to escape the city heat and visit popular

destinations like Bear Mountain, Orange Lake Park, and other beautiful outdoor recreation spaces scattered along the Hudson River.<sup>7</sup>

Massive, deluxe night steamers like the *Benjamin B. Odell* of the Central Hudson Line featured luxurious amenities comparable to those found in upscale hotels at the time.<sup>8</sup> Their main business was running freight during the week, but they ran special passenger excursions on weekends during the summer months. Working people traveling to and living in New York who could not afford a stay at a mountain hotel or other more elaborate vacation outings could afford a getaway on the Hudson.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their immense popularity at the time, steamboat excursions have gone underexamined by social historians of the Progressive Era. Accordingly, scholars have also mostly overlooked the steamboat's unique position within America's urban recreation landscape during the First World War, along with the many successive attempts by Progressive social reformers both nationally and in New York to track and quell what they judged to be certain "immoral," "dangerous," and pestiferous types of social relations and pleasure-seeking afforded by steamboat excursions.

The first section of the article discusses relevant background contextual factors, including the commercialization of urban amusements at the turn of the twentieth century and efforts by Progressive reformers to use undercover investigation to monitor and intervene in social conduct aboard steamboat excursions. A comment on the report's authorship is provided in the second section. The report is considered in the third section.

## I. Amusement Resources for Wage-Earning Women and Girls

A "golden age" of public recreation and commercialized entertainment dawned in America's cities in the 1890s, just as rapid industrialization and urbanization were restructuring everyday experiences of and assumptions about work and leisure for millions. Urban wage-earners, including a growing number of women and adolescents, sought a "necessary release from their increasingly regimented lives" in the realm of commercialized recreation.<sup>10</sup> The widening array of working-class amusements offered workers subsumed under capital "a refuge from the dominant value system of competitive individualism."<sup>11</sup> Wage-earners forged a pseudo-autonomous domain where a degree of choice and/or agency was attainable at the level of the individual, and where distinct "alternative" (if not "oppositional") working-class cultural practices and values could be fashioned into bulwarks against the despotic, disciplinary pressures of their working lives.<sup>12</sup>

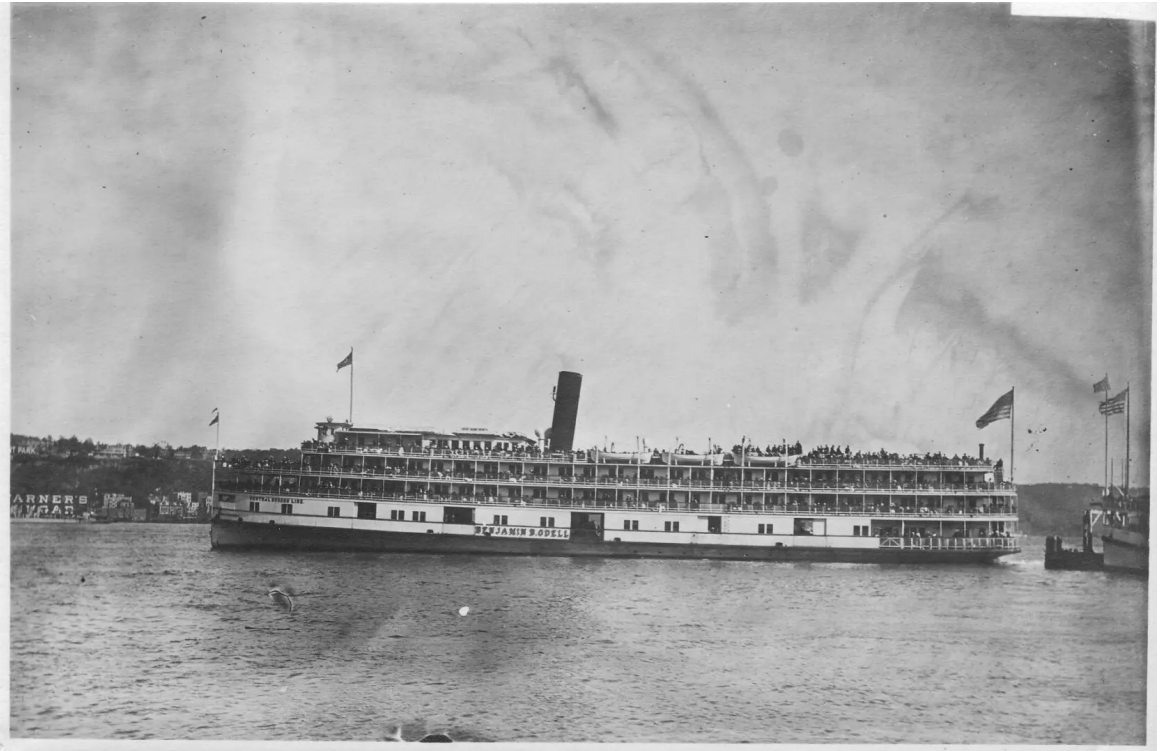


In the expanding territory of commodified heterosocial amusement, wage-earning women and girls in their leisure time "experimented with new cultural forms that articulated gender in terms of sexual expressiveness and social interaction with men."<sup>13</sup> Their heightened visibility in public offered many female workers novel forms of "physical and psychological freedom."<sup>14</sup>

Yet while wages earned outside the home afforded newfound independence, most young women still lived at home and did not get to retain much if any of their wages.<sup>15</sup> A 1910 study concluded that the vast majority of Boston's wage-earning women and girls lived at home and were expected to contribute "all their earnings to the family purse and receive back only so much as [was] necessary."<sup>16</sup> In 1916, Maude E. Miner, an influential Manhattan probation officer and secretary of the New York Probation and Protective Association, likewise reported that according to one of her Association's institutional appendages, the Girls' Protective League, "nearly all the young women living at home . . . gave their entire wage to their families," with only "some receiving back a small allowance" for carfare, meals, clothes, and/or "a small amount of amusement."<sup>17</sup> Miner, who became a COF member in 1912, emphasized that most working women had to surrender "their unbroken [pay] envelope in return for . . . little more than their board and necessary clothing." As a result, many were disposed to "seek their amusement in places frequented by dangerous people."<sup>18</sup>

The continued prevalence of "treating" throughout the 1920s implies that many working women had cause to barter sexual favors in exchange for a portion of the higher male wage.<sup>19</sup> If wage-earning women's "free" participation in leisure culture was conditioned by their scandalously low wages and lack of spending money, it was also challenged by the dramatic escalation of the assault on female "promiscuity" that unfolded during the war years, culminating in the passage of numerous pieces of draconian legislation and the arrest and indefinite incarceration of thousands of women under the auspices of the so-called "American Plan," which aspired to staunch the spread of sexually-transmitted infections via unprecedented policing measures.<sup>20</sup>

The fighting in France had stalled by the summer of 1919. But the moral panic over the spread of "venereal disease," which emerged during Pershing's 1916–1917 "Mexico Expedition," and subsequently exploded in intensity following America's declaration of war on Germany, lingered on stubbornly. It was stirred to the surface again by the prospect of many thousands of young soldiers, fresh from France and ignorant of city life, passing unsupervised through New York and other metropolises on their way home to various rural locales across America.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, according to prominent Progressive reformers, the primary "social hygiene problem" of the war concerned not prostitution, but rather sexual relations between "the individual soldier and individual girl."<sup>22</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/03.12.1004-Austin-Gallas-1.jpg> >

Figure 2. The *Benjamin B. Odell* leaving dock on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Used with permission from the Hudson River Maritime Museum, Donald C. Ringwald Collection.

In the early twentieth century, America's urban reformers assumed an increasingly unemotional, scientific posture towards crime, vice, and social disorder relative to their antecedents.<sup>23</sup> Protecting working women's right to "clean" recreation became "one element in the comprehensive effort to reconstruct community life and save the family."<sup>24</sup> Progressive urban reformers acknowledged that commercial leisure establishments filled legitimate needs felt by millions of working Americans. As one reformer focused on adolescents and childhood development put it, "After eight hours of activity as a cog in an industrial machine, the greater part of human nature [was] left over and pressing for utilization." Hence, "the hours of leisure" were "far more significant for life as a whole" for the industrial working class than were "the hours of work."<sup>25</sup> "We must admit to ourselves," exhorted leading dance hall reform crusader and head of New York's Committee on Amusement Resources for Working Girls, Belle Lindner Israels, in 1909, that "play is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity to the working world to-day."<sup>26</sup> For Israels (a future COF member), it was natural for the workingwoman to want "to break away from the constraint of her cramped, unemotional life" by seeking pleasure and autonomy in the sphere of cheap and accessible amusements.<sup>27</sup>

Such pleasures were not free, however. Amusement reformers fretted that, as founding COF member, Greenwich House organizer, and prominent feminist thinker, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, once explained, "the young men of the big cities" were "not gallantly paying

the way of these girls for nothing." In instances where women and girls were unable to "pay their cost," "attendant circumstances" could arise, converting "natural channels of joy into debasement" in the process. While "the price" of the exchange might "not be that which leads to despair," such transactions nevertheless contributed to "a lowering of the finer instinct and a gradual deterioration of" individuals' "appreciation of personal purity," thereby hastening the spread of the "social evil."<sup>28</sup>

Sunday was seen by some leading recreation reformers as "the day of compensation," which playground advocate Joseph Lee defined as "the day of fulfillment of those essential purposes of life for which the weekday has left no room," and the day when "those things that belong to us not as industrial implements" but as civilized, fully realized human beings could be cultivated.<sup>29</sup> Reformers recognized that for most women and girls making between five and nine dollars per week, music places, movie theaters, arcades, amusement parks, beaches, and railway or boat excursions, "with their doubtful attractions," represented the only easily accessible leisure options.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, commercialized leisure presented "a growing menace," a corrupting force driven by morally unscrupulous, profit-hungry pleasure merchants.<sup>31</sup> Finding cities without adequate "clean" recreational provision, predatory "private commercial interests" had stepped in to exploit the lacuna "for great financial gain," utilizing "every possible method . . . to increase profits," regardless of perceived hazards to workers, consumers, families, social order, and the moral character and physical welfare of the urban population.<sup>32</sup> Progressive reformers worried the working girl's "innocent love of pleasure" was being "transmuted through gradual corrupting relationships into a life of danger" in these commercial leisure spaces, which many parks and amusement activists perceived to lack the requisite levels of supervision by morally credible authorities needed to protect the population from the dangerous influences emanating therefrom.<sup>33</sup>

Commercialized leisure culture both "fascinated and appalled" a wide gamut of America's leading Progressive settlement advocates, social scientists, and social workers. Though ideologically diverse, urban reformers broadly agreed that allowing the character of public recreation to be directed by unfettered commercial forces was both to deny wage-earning women a "legitimate outlet for their natural love of pleasure" and to force the working masses to seek restoration from the strain of industrial work life and cramped housing in the morally dangerous forms of gratification offered by these affordable attractions, where moral ends were subordinated to desire for profit-maximization. Because the realm of cheap amusements directly influenced the lives of millions of adults and adolescents, it represented by 1919 an even "more serious challenge to the moral order" than the threat of commercialized prostitution, the most visible and established forms of which had been effectively broken up and scattered to the margins in New York and other large metropolises by the mid-1910s.<sup>34</sup> "Private amusement enterprises," as Israels put it, were "the open door

for the social evil." Exposure to the "wrong kind of recreation," argued Israels, spawned "disastrous results."<sup>35</sup> The average workingwoman's "moral vigilance" was steadily "broken down" through exposure to immoral conditions in the amusement establishments accessible to her.<sup>36</sup> The combination of "infectious music, the hot room, the exciting contact of her partner and the drink served during the intermission" inevitably induced her to relax her usual standards of conduct and morality until, "hooked by an illusory and perilous "ideal of amusement," she finally embarked "upon a career of loose living."<sup>37</sup>

The "pitfalls" for women, Israels and other recreation reformers believed, "were at their worst in the summertime, when beach resorts, amusement parks, picnic areas and excursion boats all made alcohol easily available," and where rowdy music and novel dance styles characterized by intimate, cheek-to-cheek contact thrived unchecked.<sup>38</sup> For many Progressive turn-of-the-century reformers, "the entire working class appeared as a group of children whose behavior needed to be reshaped and controlled" via undercover surveillance.<sup>39</sup> As Elisabeth Perry has argued, leading dance hall reformers and other Progressive amusement activists "had a tendency to patronize," or in some cases "'matronize,' those they wished to help, and to offer only palliatives rather than changes more central to working-class needs."<sup>40</sup> Relatedly, leading urban antiprostitution and anti-vice campaigns of the time found some success in reshaping "urban sociability" and diminishing "the volume and visibility of organized prostitution," but largely failed to improve the life chances of many wage-earning and immigrant women.<sup>41</sup>

For wage-earners looking to sidestep the tightened grip of morality regulators over urban amusement spaces, a ride aboard the *Odell* afforded valuable opportunities for unsupervised entertainment, romance, and casual and transactional sexual commerce. Investigations into public conduct aboard steamboat excursions unfolded in large cities around the country, mostly without the heavy levels of press coverage afforded other similar investigations. Immorality was "a commonplace" on Baltimore's popular excursion boats and around the shoreside parks and resorts regularly serviced by them.<sup>42</sup> In Chicago, alderman George Pretzel reported witnessing "unprintable" sights aboard lake excursion boats. Women were allowed "to solicit openly" on the decks, he said, while the boat's staterooms were "so busy" with immoral traffic it was "necessary to stand in line and await your turn." Pretzel charged that many women who had been driven out of the city's old red-light district by police action over the previous years were now "plying their arts among the passengers on excursion boats."<sup>43</sup> Investigators employed by Chicago's Juvenile Protective Association, a prominent reform society founded by Jane Addams in 1901, took more than three dozen undercover journeys aboard the large excursion boats on Lake Michigan throughout the early 1910s. They discovered that while the boats seemed to provide "innocent enjoyment with fresh air and the holiday making which city young people so obviously need," they were in practice "virtually floating houses of vice and a fruitful source

of supply for the so-called 'White Slaver.'"<sup>44</sup> The Chicago Vice Commission, the first mayor-appointed urban vice commission of its kind, affirmed these conclusions in its 1911 report, *The Social Evil in Chicago*. The Commission found that holiday steamers operating in the city's vicinity transformed into "floating assignation houses" during the summer; staterooms were rented out several times over the course of a three or four hour trip, sometimes by young couples who investigators observed to be lying on berths within in various states of undress.<sup>45</sup> Gambling was practiced openly aboard the steamers, liquor was sold to minors, staterooms were rented out indiscriminately without regard for the marital status of couples, over and over again for short intervals during a single trip, and couples were exploiting the dimly lit, unsupervised decks to get physically intimate in ways offensive to reformers' social hygiene-oriented sensibilities.<sup>46</sup> Dancing aboard the lake boats was "vulgar, rough and indecent," precisely the sort which reformers of the day worried could corrupt the moral character of otherwise innocent young amusement-seekers.<sup>47</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2003.12.1058-Austin-Gallas.jpg> >

Figure 3. The *Homer Ramsdell* of the Central Hudson Line, underway on the Hudson River. This photograph shows her original appearance, before the 1911 fire that necessitated her reconstruction. Used with permission from the Hudson River Maritime Museum, Donald C. Ringwald Collection.

Similar "objectionable" practices of casual and for-profit "immorality" were also observed aboard Hudson River excursion steamers. Writing in 1909, Isaacs charged that behavior aboard the Central Hudson Line's *Homer Ramsdell* was "far worse" than even that observed on the typical Coney Island excursion boats. The worst offenses, said Isaacs,

pivoted on the use of these larger boats' private staterooms, which were rented liberally to "anybody who [had] the price."<sup>48</sup> According to undercover investigators employed by Israel's committee, many couples who rented the staterooms aboard the *Homer Ramsdell* "did not require the use of them all day," since their purpose in renting them was "not one of rest or comfort." So they engaged in a secondary speculation, renting them for brief periods. An interview with a ticket seller confirmed that even though all the staterooms had already been booked by the time the boat was underway, a room could nevertheless be acquired for twenty-five cents for the brief interval between the 129th Street stop and the final destination at Franklin Street pier.<sup>49</sup> To make matters worse, from the perspective of concerned amusement reformers at least, there were "so many political and other interests" involved in the steamboat excursion trade—indeed, as Israel observed, an ex-governor of New York, Benjamin B. Odell (the namesake of the boat discussed in this essay), controlled the Central Hudson Navigation Company—that the problem of "how to legislate out of existence the bad features of the summer amusement places" appeared insoluble.<sup>50</sup>

By 1912, Israel's group was pursuing a two-pronged strategy for opposing steamboat "vice," namely cooperation with business enterprises and legislative reform.<sup>51</sup> It had successfully partnered with eight steamboat lines and convinced the New England Navigation Company to put supervisors on boats to police moral behavior, and was actively attempting to push through federal legislation to address perceived problems related to dimly lit decks, the indiscriminate renting of staterooms, and the general lack of supervision of social conduct.<sup>52</sup> Yet three years later reformers were still commenting that aboard the apparently respectable Hudson River steamboat excursions unfolded the "worst evils, including the use of staterooms on day boats for immoral purposes."<sup>53</sup> Styles of dance prohibited in the city, where restrictive dance hall legislation was enforced in the most popular places by a force of hard-nosed inspectors, were flourishing on the unsupervised, crowded dancefloors of Hudson River steamboats, especially those of the colossal, luxurious night boats that ran popular weekend excursions during the summer months.

### "Floating Houses of Prostitution"

It was hardly news to the COF in July 1919 that certain "immoral" forms of social conduct could be found aboard the popular steamboat excursions on the Hudson River. Already in 1908, the COF's chairman, pioneering archaeologist and rector of St. Michael's Church on West 99th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, Reverend Dr. John P. Peters, wrote that undercover investigations had "shown that some of the steamboat companies, whose officers and directors are quite respectable persons, allow the staterooms on certain of

their boats to be let by the hour, or similar periods, evidently for immoral purposes, these boats being in fact floating houses of prostitution."<sup>54</sup>

The COF was the most powerful and successful private antiprostitution and police reform organization in New York City during the Progressive Era.<sup>55</sup> Funded by wealthy New Yorkers, especially including (beginning in the 1910s) the nation's chief anti-"white slavery" advocate, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and his Rockefeller Foundation, and consisting of well-connected clergy, sociology-trained social workers, lawyers, social settlement advocates, professors, and various other well-educated and often highly credentialed professionals, the COF worked to alter the "moral geography" of the city from above "by exploiting the mutability of consumer capitalism."<sup>56</sup>

The COF's original goal was a relatively narrow one: to close and/or effectively regulate the notorious so-called "Raines Law hotels." Like its predecessor organization, the Committee of Fifteen, the COF and its allies emphasized that the moral and/or hereditary unfitness of "weak-willed" individuals was far from the only driver of "the social evil." They believed that corrupt authorities and apparently respectable business enterprises and property owners who profited either directly or indirectly from forms of "commercialized vice" bore much of the responsibility for the perceived moral decay in America's cities. The 1896 Raines Law aimed to curb drinking on Sundays by restricting alcohol sales to hotels, but instead inadvertently resulted in the conversion of hundreds of saloons into "badly run" "pseudo-hotels," complete with bedrooms on the premises, which remained open all night, attracted unwitting tourists, enjoyed police protection, and relied on profits from gambling, prostitution, and other "vices" to offset higher operating costs.<sup>57</sup> As its work against the "evil" of the Raines Law hotels progressed, the COF's leaders came to see the battle against commercialized vice as having more and more ramifications. By the time of the group's reorganization under a broader mandate in February 1912, its original desire to control "disorderly" saloonkeepers and property owners and break up related business connections had evolved into a more ambitious and far-reaching mission of gaining "control of public amusement" in general across the city.<sup>58</sup>

The COF pursued a savvy form of interest group politics to defend the "moral character" of the wage-earning population, protecting it from the perceived dangers of "vice" while cultivating new methods of social control and punishment. Its members tended to avoid the "emotional and moral valences" of old-fashioned "rescue work."<sup>59</sup> COF members were by no means always in agreement, but they generally concurred that "repressive laws produced better people and a more moral urban environment suitable for producing people with better 'character.'"<sup>60</sup> The COF sought to "break the link between sex and commercialized leisure" and to clean up amusement culture as much as possible in general through surveillance of immigrant and working-class leisure spaces.<sup>61</sup> This surveillance

enabled COF members to covertly keep tabs on a variety of social actors simultaneously, including commercial workers, property owners, store managers, proprietors, medical professionals, "charity girls," sexual minorities, police officers, sex workers, middle-class "slummers," and working-class "toughs."<sup>62</sup>

In addition to calling for an end to municipal corruption and for the construction of better, more efficient police and court systems, the COF argued for the "separation of recreation from vice."<sup>63</sup> To achieve this and other goals, staff members trained and commanded a force of amateur undercover investigators, men and women chosen for their ability to blend in or "pass" within various working-class leisure environments and solicit useful information without arousing suspicion. By using the information gathered by its investigators in various ways, the COF "made an end run around the law and the legislature and went straight to the source," forging cooperative bonds with "insurance companies and liquor dealers, who were already on the offensive against temperance organizations." In the process, it cultivated a formidable "mode of interest group politics" that accommodated business interests and forced "them to become partners in its (moral) program."<sup>64</sup>

The police and the COF initially distrusted one another. But their relations gradually improved. By 1918, the COF was, in Peters's words, "almost . . . an adjunct of the police force."<sup>65</sup>

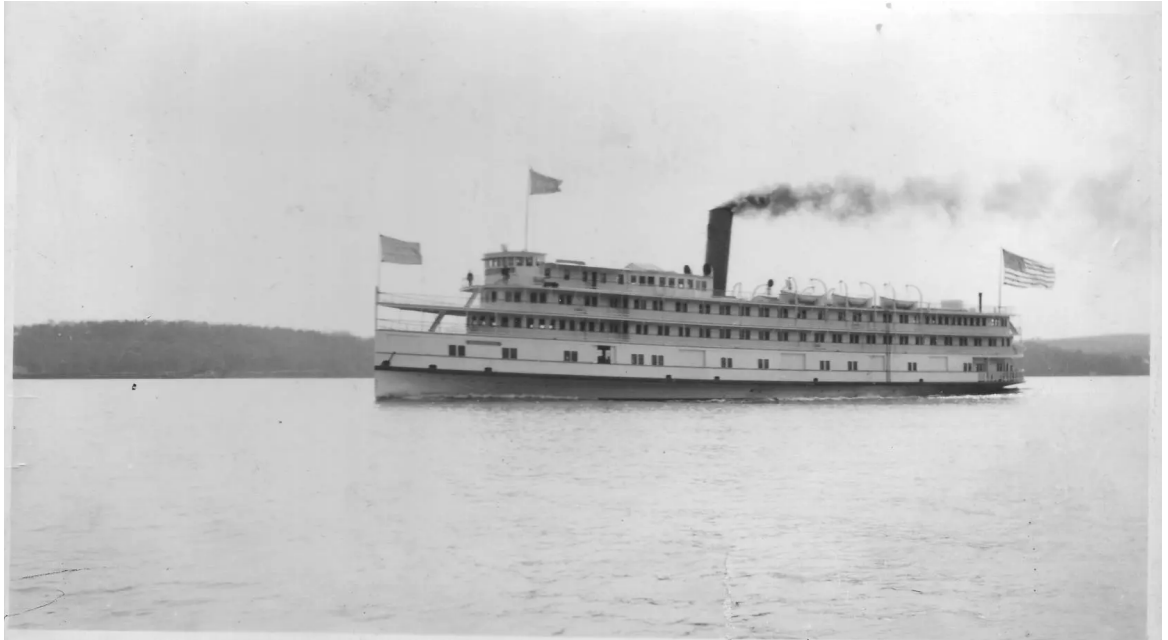
As Scott W. Stern notes, COF investigators "gambled and drank on the job, and possibly slept with some" of the individuals they were tasked with observing, though such events would be left out of the reports they submitted to their superiors, reports that were regularly passed along to various police authorities cooperating with the COF's agenda.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, undercover vice investigators were problematically tasked with being participants in the very "disorderly" activities they were supposed to report on.<sup>67</sup> However, the "mantle of investigator" conveniently elevated them above moral scrutiny, as far as the COF's leadership was concerned.<sup>68</sup>

As part of its regular work monitoring commercial amusement spaces, the COF attended to the peculiar forms of "immorality" observed aboard the large steamers servicing the city's vicinity. In 1916, Maude Miner echoed Israel's prior observation that steamboats operating between cities in New York and surrounding states were apparently being "utilized for immoral purposes." "Indecent actions" and "the presence of professional prostitutes," alleged Miner, had been registered on many such boats, which sported "dimly lighted decks," and whose staterooms were noted to have been sometimes "occupied several times during a trip of less than twelve hours," raising suspicions as to the nature of their usage.<sup>69</sup> To combat the "moral dangers" facing working girls and women aboard these vessels, Miner argued that steamboat companies should enhance illumination of decks,



impose stricter regulation of stateroom rentals, and employ an adequate number of matrons aboard each steamboat to more effectively supervise passengers' conduct.<sup>70</sup>

Leaving aside a few scattered public utterances, the COF assumed a policy of no publicity when it came to its surveillance of steamboat companies, which tended to be owned and operated by highly reputable individuals and/or families, preferring instead to use information gathered by investigators in direct, behind-the-scenes negotiations with corporate management.<sup>71</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/99.08.0016-Austin-Gallas.jpg> >

Figure 4. The *Benjamin B. Odell*'s maiden voyage, April 1911. Used with permission from the Hudson River Maritime Museum.

## II. Note on Authorship

The investigation report discussed in the next part of this article, an eight-page typewritten document housed in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library, is unsigned, making the identity of the investigator a matter of speculation.<sup>72</sup> There are good reasons, I think, to assume the report was penned by David Oppenheim, an experienced Jewish investigator active throughout 1919 whose fluency in Yiddish and German and affinity for fitting in among vastly dissimilar crowds made him a particularly useful investigator for the COF. At eight typewritten pages the report is exceptionally lengthy and contains comprehensive accounts of numerous conversations. This comports with how Oppenheim typically worked. Few investigators attempted such an approach to report writing, probably because it demanded the possession of a remarkably keen

memory as investigators did not have access to any portable recording devices.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, language used in the unsigned report is like that used in other reports Oppenheim wrote around this time. The two most convincing instances involve the use of the slang phrases “appeared to be game” and “pull off a piece,” which appear both in the report on the *Odell* and in at least one other report written and signed by Oppenheim within three months of the *Odell* report’s creation.<sup>74</sup> Finally, Oppenheim, who owned a clothing store on Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, possessed remarkable capacities that few other COF investigators could match. His distinctive investigation style matches up well with how the unnamed undercover investigator behaved aboard the *Odell*.<sup>75</sup> As historian Jennifer Fronc has observed, Oppenheim “was the most adept” of all the COF’s undercover agents “at establishing himself as a regular at neighborhood saloons,” because he took an “active role” relative to other investigators, “[chatting] up waiters,” talking “about (and with) women,” and “hold[ing] forth on horseracing, gambling, and other city pleasures.”<sup>76</sup> For these reasons, although the report’s authorship is undoubtedly a matter of educated guesswork, I present the narrative as if Oppenheim were the author and label the unnamed narrator “Oppenheim.”

### III. “A Chance to Pull Off a Piece”

David Oppenheim’s general impression of the crowd aboard the *Benjamin B. Odell* was that it was “fairly well behaved.” He “did not notice very many professional prostitutes,” and saw no “actual soliciting.” However, there seemed “to be quite a few unescorted questionable women and girls aboard.” The undercover investigator claimed in his report to have witnessed more than fifty “pickups” over the course of the evening. In the lower of the steamer’s two saloon decks there was live music, and couples were “shimmying and dancing real raw.” As many as thirty-five couples danced in a small, crowded area that had been cleared out near the piano, which in Oppenheim’s estimation was fit for no more than five couples. Not only was there “no one . . . to stop the couples from dancing as they pleased,” but “in fact the musicians were urging on the couples to shimmy,” and even made attempts later to “promote a shimmying contest between a few couples.”<sup>77</sup> In the COF’s view, the fact that waged workers were encouraging passengers to engage in “disorderly” recreational activities this way, and that management neglected to intervene or prevent such behavior would indicate that the *Odell*’s owners bore a large degree of responsibility for the presence of the “social evil” aboard the packed river steamer. Enhanced methods of supervision were needed in order for the *Odell* to be transformed from a space of social contagion, a node for the spread of dangerous diseases and immoral attitudes and behaviors, into a sufficiently reputable and “clean” form of leisure.

The *Odell* had eighty-five to ninety staterooms available for rent that night, according to one crew member Oppenheim interviewed, all of which were occupied by the time Oppenheim had boarded. Sensing that these rooms might be used for "immoral purposes" in the kinds of ways discussed in the earlier writings of Peters, Israels, and others, Oppenheim "watched these staterooms carefully." Men and women were "coming out of these rooms," he noted. But he did not witness "any woman flirt with a man and then steer him to her stateroom." These observations indicated that the staterooms were probably not currently being used for the purposes of organized exploitation of sexual labor.

Casual sexual interactions, however, seemed to be rampant in the *Odell's* staterooms. Indeed, the COF probably would have concluded on the basis of Oppenheim's account that it was possible or even likely given the lack of effective surveillance by management that the staterooms were being used to facilitate some small-scale, informal commercial sexual transactions between semi-professional or "casual" sex workers or "charity girls." Unlike traditional "prostitution" arrangements, such forms of sexual labor and barter exchange might plausibly have been going on discretely and without the direct knowledge of the boat's corporate managers. Such activities were camouflaged to a certain extent, since they were often indistinguishable from increasingly mainstream practices of pickup culture.<sup>78</sup> The staterooms were private, ask-no-questions spaces. Working-class couples who did not have privacy at home could get intimate in these spaces without raising suspicion. This was useful whether one was looking to engage in casual sex or to transact an exchange of sexual labor for money. Several of the rooms, noted Oppenheim, were shared by two or three couples who were "all bunked together." "The majority of the women" that he saw coming from these rooms "appeared to be game" (that is, they appeared to be "charity," or women willing to exchange sexual favors for ticket fare, attention, drinks, food, companionship, or other goods). Oppenheim paid particular attention to room number 28, which was shared by three couples. The women were about eighteen to twenty years of age in appearance, while the men "appeared to be a lot of young toughs." After watching the room for a while, he noticed that the couples were engaged in a kind of relay system: "two of the couples would leave the room" while the third "would remain there" for some time. "The two couples were giving the third a chance apparently to get away with something," concluded Oppenheim. This procedure "was repeated till all the couples had had a chance to be in the stateroom alone" for anywhere between twenty-five to thirty minutes. If there was any doubt about what was going on in the room, a porter with whom Oppenheim engaged in conversation confirmed that the couples were "giving one another a chance to pull off a piece." Later, after the boat had passed the first of two stops in Manhattan at 129th Street, Oppenheim peeked in on some of those staterooms which had just been vacated by disembarking passengers. "The conditions of the rooms," he wrote, "showed to what purpose they were being used." Beds were "mussed up very bad, not as if a person had just taken a nap," but "more like a couple

of people . . . had been wrestling on" them. Floors were littered with dirty towels that had "apparently been used for joy towels."<sup>79</sup>

### "Looking for a Woman"

While aboard the *Odell*, Oppenheim spoke with several Black employees of the Central Hudson Line, including at least two stewardesses and two porters. (As Belle Israels noted already in 1909, the grand night boats of the Central Hudson Line employed "respectable colored women" to act as "matrons," but in practice they had no real authority or "moral effect" on the crowd.<sup>80</sup>) Through these conversations with employees, he learned about some of the surreptitious money-making schemes at work just beneath the radar on the boat, all of which were of potential interest to his superiors.

One porter, John, promised "to look around and see if he couldn't find a woman" for Oppenheim. It was his first day on the job. Another porter, Cooper, said he regularly sees "a few professional hustlers" aboard the *Odell* every Sunday. He was, he explained, "on speaking terms" with one of these women, but she was not on board that night and thus he could not introduce her to him. Cooper also claimed that there *were* "a few" professional sex workers on the boat known to him "by sight." These women were "out for the money," said Cooper, but all of them "seemed to have men with them" already tonight. If Oppenheim did succeed in securing a room, Cooper assured him he could take any woman he liked there, since passengers did not have to specify the number of guests up front when renting a room. "It was no one's business how many" individuals used a stateroom once it was engaged by a passenger, he said. Clearly the boat's private staterooms provided employees ample opportunities to work hand-in-glove with individual sex workers, helping them secure clients discreetly on commission. Cooper promised he would "do his best to try to pick up a woman" for Oppenheim and to "see if he couldn't get a stateroom for" him later on, explaining that passengers could remain in their staterooms overnight while the boat was docked at Fulton Street.<sup>81</sup>

One of the stewardesses, Jennie, told Oppenheim she would "look around and see if she couldn't find a woman" to put him "next to" after he mentioned he "was looking for a woman." She said there were "plenty of women" that Oppenheim "ought to be able to pick up on the boat." Every Sunday there were "a lot of women" on the boat, she said, and she knew "their faces well and could easily tell their business." She mentioned that "a couple of girls" living in Newburgh worked "this boat regularly," and that "some of the colored . . . stewardesses on some of the boats of this company have also been doing this business." They were all under surveillance now, however, "because one of the stewardesses" aboard the steamer *Homer Ramsdell* "had overdone it." She had been "caught going into staterooms with men" by the management and discharged. Word on the street was that

this woman “handled so many men on each trip” that she “was making more money than the company.” While he spoke with her, Jennie’s roommate approached and asked for the key to their quarters. A man was looking for a room to use “for a while,” the roommate said, and since all the staterooms were booked, she had offered to let the man use their room for a short time. Should he ask for it again, said the roommate, she would lend him the key, at which time Jennie should “stay around and look out.” Clearly the stewardesses were engaged in a side hustle of some sort, capitalizing on the boat’s limited bed space in ways the COF’s leadership would almost certainly reckon as morally dangerous. Though all the staterooms had been engaged by the time Oppenheim boarded the *Odell* in Newburgh, Jennie declared he would probably be able to remain on the *Odell* all night with whomever he liked, since the purser “re-rents the rooms again after the people that were occupying them leave the boat” at the 129th Street stop. If he waited for the final leg of the journey to Fulton Street, he could almost certainly get a room. There were a few detectives lurking about, she said, but Oppenheim would not have to worry; once he rented a room, it would be “none of their business who occupies” it. This system deviated greatly from how hotel rentals worked within the city proper. As Oppenheim knew well from personal experience, hotels in New York were barred from admitting guests without baggage, and clerks were supposed to refuse service to “suspicious” transients. On the *Odell* by contrast, no one was inquiring much at all about how rooms were used, or indeed about which passengers were coming and going from them or why.<sup>82</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Benjamin-B-Odell-deck-scene358-Austin-Gallas.jpg> >

Figure 5. Passengers aboard the observation deck of the *Benjamin B. Odell*. Courtesy of the Ewen Collection, used with permission from owner, William Ewen, Jr.

## "Companionship and a Little Fun"

Oppenheim got "next to" two women while aboard the *Odel* that night. The first woman was introduced to him by an old acquaintance of his, Jack Bancroft, who happened to be working as a singer on the *Odel*. Bancroft worked as a waiter at several restaurants in the city, which is where he had met Oppenheim (whom he did not suspect to be an undercover vice investigator working for the COF). Indeed, Oppenheim's intimate knowledge of working-class leisure culture made him a valuable asset to the COF, even as his approach necessitated greater participation in the activities its members hoped to inhibit. Because he became personally acquainted with many workers employed in various amusement and drinking establishments across the city, he enjoyed, in Fronc's words, a "familiarity with the staff in many places under investigation" that often "yielded invaluable information that was otherwise unavailable."<sup>83</sup> It was Bancroft's first day on the job, so he "didn't know much," but he said he would "try to get some girl" for the investigator anyway. At length Bancroft introduced Oppenheim to a young woman named Eva Gould, a recent transplant from Cleveland residing in a furnished room at 127 West 77th Street. According to the business phone number she provided Oppenheim, Eva worked at an office off Madison Square Park, probably as a stenographer, telephone operator, or secretary. Eva was "not a professional prostitute," wrote Oppenheim in his report, but, as Bancroft separately confirmed, she appeared to be "game." When Oppenheim told her he was "trying to get a stateroom," Eva replied, "Haven't you got one, I thought you had one." This remark reinforced the investigator's earlier assessment that the staterooms were ideal spaces for sex and were thus probably being used by couples of all sorts for what the COF considered to be "immoral purposes." It also confirmed that Eva was probably "game," that is, that she was willing to have casual sex without expectation of monetary payment. Eva told the undercover investigator she had "made several trips on these boats and always has a little fun." Jennie, the stewardess with whom he spoke later in the evening, observed Oppenheim speaking with Eva and confirmed that she had indeed seen her on the boat a few times previously. Before parting from him, Eva told Oppenheim that any time he took "the night boat to Albany," or if he "wanted to take a trip of that kind on a Saturday night, she would come along and stay" the night with him in Albany. She gave him her telephone number and they parted ways.<sup>84</sup>

The second "game" woman Oppenheim picked up aboard the *Odel* that night, Nellie, was a schoolteacher from a small town north of Boston who had been staying for a few weeks at the Cambridge Hotel, located at 37-42 Nevins Street, Brooklyn. Nellie explained that she had been "trying to make" Oppenheim all night but had seen him speaking with the other woman, with whom she assumed he had partnered up. Like Eva, Nellie was "not a professional prostitute," but was instead a workingwoman interested in casual sex. Rather than waiting for him "to ask her what was doing," she "started the subject," bluntly stating

that she was "lonesome and wants company." "We are all human and want companionship and a little fun," she said. Then she asked if the two of them "couldn't get a stateroom" and "both stay over" aboard until the morning, when "it was time for her to get to work" at the office on Broadway where she was employed. Alternatively, he could accompany her back to the Cambridge Hotel. Though the place was "pretty strict," she said, Oppenheim could come up there by himself, register a room separately, and then "come into her room" without raising suspicions.<sup>85</sup>

Though Nellie did not admit it directly, "from her talk" Oppenheim came to understand that "there had been someone in her room at the Cambridge before." However, since apparently this had happened "without the knowledge of the proprietor" of the hotel, it did not appear that the management of the Cambridge was running the place in an openly "disorderly" manner—a key distinction from the perspective of COF members, for whom property owners' willful participation in commercialized disorder represented the gravest danger to public health and morals. On the other hand, Nellie said she was "positive" that the hotel saloon remained open after one o'clock in direct violation of the late-night restrictions the COF and police department had actively been enforcing across the city since America's entry in World War I two years prior. She also mentioned she was "overanxious for a little whiskey" and that she hoped Oppenheim might be able to score some once they arrived at Fulton Street.<sup>86</sup>

### "Ain't a Drop in the Place"

When the *Benjamin B. Odell* docked at Pier 24, Oppenheim and Nellie disembarked together. Rather than taking her directly back to the Cambridge Hotel where she was staying, Oppenheim set about trying to find her "a drink of whiskey" as she requested.<sup>87</sup> He asked a few men on the street where he "could get something stronger than 2.75 beer."<sup>88</sup> After being refused entry to one establishment, the duo was admitted around midnight to the Press Café, located at 93 Park Row near city hall. When the server came for their orders, Oppenheim at first "didn't ask for whiskey" directly, but instead said cryptically, "Do the best you can," urging him to serve them "the strongest you got."<sup>89</sup>

When the server returned some minutes later with port wine, Oppenheim, unsatisfied, asked whether he "couldn't give" them "a little whiskey." "There ain't a drop in the place," replied the server. But this did not sit right with Oppenheim; a stand keeper nearby had told him and his female companion that he was certain they "could get the stuff at the Press," since it was well known in the area "that they [were] not a bit careful in handing out whiskey across the bar." As they went to leave the café, resigned that the server was not going to aid them in their search, Oppenheim stopped to speak with a man seated near the door whom he assumed was "connected with the premises." He told the man that they had been

“trying to get a little booze” but had been unsuccessful, then asked whether “he didn’t know of any place where [they] could get it.” The man responded by inquiring if they were looking for a pint or half pint of whiskey, to which Oppenheim simply replied, “yes.” The man said he would see what he could do, and reappearing several minutes later, he told them the place had no pints or half pints, but if Oppenheim “was willing to spend a dollar and a half,” plus twenty-five cents to the man “for the trouble,” they would fill a soda water bottle with the stuff for him. Oppenheim agreed, and around ten minutes later the man returned with a soda water bottle full of whiskey. Having found what they were after, Oppenheim escorted Nellie back to the Cambridge Hotel. Though she wanted him to rent a room so they could spend the night together, he excused himself, promising to call. It had been an uncommonly informative and eventful night.

## Conclusion

There was “plenty of the charity stuff” aboard the *Odell*, concluded Oppenheim. While he had discovered vague indications that professional sex workers were regularly using steamboats to conduct business, there did not in his view “seem to be much of the commercialized vice aboard.” However, based on the limited information he was able to gather during the voyage, Oppenheim concluded confidently that he had “no doubt” that the management knew “for what purpose their staterooms [were] being used.”<sup>90</sup>

Examination of conditions aboard the *Odell* revealed to the COF the extent to which Hudson River steamers catering to weekend excursioners operated outside of the norms of behavior and systems of police surveillance prevalent in Manhattan, where liquor prohibition and a variety of overlapping draconian schemes of wartime social control and moral policing were actively working to discipline and restrict wage-earning women’s sexual autonomy, leisure-time activities, and heterosocial amusement and courtship practices in commercial amusement spaces.

In the eyes of Oppenheim’s employers, the apparent lack of regulation of dancing and entertainment by the boat’s management, the general absence of adequate systems for supervising passengers’ social conduct, and the observed practice of renting out staterooms (and, apparently, of staff quarters) indiscriminately for short periods would have constituted clear indications that the *Odell*—and, presumably, other Hudson River steamboats enjoyed by huge crowds of amusement-seekers—presented considerable hazards to public social and moral “hygiene.”

Summer steamboat excursions provided wage-earning passengers hailing from a broad cross-section of American society with valuable opportunities to socialize, find love, and/or get physically intimate. Shorn of mainland “protections,” relatively under-monitored



steamers like the *Odell* constituted liminal, "heterotopic," fringe spaces that floated in a state of pseudo-autonomy with respect to the dominant, repressive norms of social and sexual conduct enforced across New York City during the war years.

## Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648> > . For Foucault, heterotopias are transitory "counter-sites," where, for particular historical reasons, certain cultural norms and practices regulating everyday social space are restaged, contested, and/or inverted. ↩
2. The *Benjamin B. Odell* was a 280-foot steel propellor steamer that boasted ample capacity for freight and passengers. Its reinforced hull was ideal for cutting through frozen waterways. For additional photographs of the *Odell*, see "Latest Maritime News in Pictures," *Marine Review* 46, no. 6 (June, 1916): 204, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112043103727?urlappend=%3Bseq=218%3Bownerid=115842177-224> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112043103727?urlappend=%3Bseq=218%3Bownerid=115842177-224> > ; William H. Ewen Jr., *Steamboats on the Hudson River* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), 39, 41; "Steamer Benjamin B. Odell," Hudson River Night Boat Collection, Hudson River Maritime Museum, 1911, <https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/hrmm/id/480/rec/1> < <https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/hrmm/id/480/rec/1> > ; "Sunday News: Steamer *Benjamin B. Odell*, 1911–1937," Hudson River Maritime Museum History Blog, April 26, 2020, <https://www.hrmm.org/history-blog/sunday-news-steamer-benjamin-b-odell-1911-1937> < <https://www.hrmm.org/history-blog/sunday-news-steamer-benjamin-b-odell-1911-1937> > . ↩
3. The so-called Chicago Race Riot also coincidentally began on July 27, 1919, the same day the events in the report discussed in this article took place. The riot, which lasted more than three days and resulted in the deaths of more than twenty Black people at the hands of a mob, was sparked by conflicts over that city's racially segregated beaches. Carl Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044020443180> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044020443180> > ; Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011). ↩
4. For journalistic coverage of Hudson River steamboats as popular courtship spaces, see "Day Line Taboos Spooning," *New York Times*, June 13, 1920, 11, <https://nyti.ms/3AIVuEC> < <https://nyti.ms/3AIVuEC> > ; Helen Bullitt Lowry, "Wanted: A New O. Henry," *New York Times*, June 20, 1920, Section 7, 4, <https://nyti.ms/31YA2qw> < <https://nyti.ms/31YA2qw> > ; Marguerite Dean, "Gotham's High Cost of Loving!" *Evening World Daily Magazine* (New York), July 14, 1920, 21, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1920-07-14/ed-1/seq-21/> < <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1920-07-14/ed-1/seq-21/> > . ↩
5. Scott W. Stern, *The Trials of Nina McCall: Sex, Surveillance, and the Decades-Long Government Plan to Imprison 'Promiscuous' Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018). ↩
6. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 121. ↩
7. State of New York, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Commissioners of the Palisades Interstate Park* (Albany: J. B. Lyon Co. Printers, 1920), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097760516> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097760516> > ; *Rand McNally Hudson River Guide to Places of Interest to Tourists and Excursionists* (New York: Rand McNally & Co., 1915), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t84j11s0v> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t84j11s0v> > . ↩
8. Ewen, *Steamboats on the Hudson*, 17. ↩

9. Allyne H. Lange, forward to Ewen, *Steamboats on the Hudson*, 7. ↩
10. Andrew W. Kahrl, "'The Slightest Semblance of Unruliness': Steamboat Excursions, Pleasure Resorts, and the Emergence of Segregation Culture on the Potomac," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (March 2008): 1114, 1116, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25095322> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/25095322> > . Kahrl notes that this "golden age" of urban amusements was based on the systematic exclusion of Black Americans. As Hartman observes, the COF, believing sociability across "the color line" to be detrimental to social order, employed undercover investigators and cooperated with business interests to enforce racial segregation extralegally in working-class recreation spaces "as a way to maintain the health and morality of the social body." Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 248. On the COF's efforts to surveil Black commercial and private leisure spaces and furnished room districts, including both its independent efforts and its cooperative work with police officials, see Jennifer Fronc, "The Horns of the Dilemma: Race Mixing and the Enforcement of Jim Crow in New York City," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 1 (November 2006): 8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0096144206290263> < <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0096144206290263> > ; Stephen Robertson, "Harlem Undercover: Vice Investigators, Race, and Prostitution, 1910–1930," *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 4 (May 2009): 491–492, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144209333370> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144209333370> > ; Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 144; Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garten, and Graham White, "Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 3 (September 2012): 443–466, <https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs21303> < <https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs21303> > . ↩
11. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 4. See also George W. Alger, "Leisure—for What?" *Atlantic Monthly* 135, no. 4 (April 1925): 483–492, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/203622608> < <https://www.proquest.com/docview/203622608> > ; Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 64. ↩
12. The saloon's status as a site of "alternative" rather than "oppositional" working-class culture, that is, as an ameliorative space where class tensions were lessened and the dangerous, anarchistic ideas in the mind of the working man were "ironed out," was reckoned by leading "wets" as a point against prohibition. Benjamin De Casseres, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Unhappiness," *New York Times Magazine*, January 18, 1920, 6, <https://nyti.ms/3yPvOgV> < <https://nyti.ms/3yPvOgV> > . ↩
13. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 6. As one influential reformer wrote of the attitude of New York's wage-earning women and girls in 1909, "No amusement is complete in which 'he' is not a factor." Belle Lindner Israels, "The Way of the Girl," *The Survey* 22, no. 14 (July 1909): 486, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015027568255?urlappend=%3Bseq=506%3Bownerid=9007199255370796-516> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015027568255?urlappend=%3Bseq=506%3Bownerid=9007199255370796-516> > . "The working girl's pleasures," wrote the COF's Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch in 1917, pivoted chiefly on "dancing, the theatre, and the young man." Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, *The City Worker's World in America* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), 131, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044014548242> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044014548242> > ; emphasis added. ↩
14. Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1800–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 50. In Simkhovitch's words, since "play, leisure, freedom," were "all bound up in the word recreation," to deny recreation to a large portion of the population was "to make men a means to an end—the one unpardonable sin for a democracy." Simkhovitch, *The City Worker's World*, 138. ↩
15. Clement, *Love for Sale*, 51. ↩
16. Susan M. Kingsbury, "Standards of Living and the Self-Dependent Woman," *Proceedings of the Academy of the Political Science in the City of New York* 1, no. 1 (October 1910): 72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171698> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171698> > . On women's wages, work conditions, and living standards in early-twentieth-century New York, see Louise Bolard More, *Wage-Earners' Budgets: A Study of Standards and Cost of Living in New York City* (New York

- City: Henry Holt and Company, 1907); Robert Coit Chapin, *The Standard of Living Among Workingmen's Families in New York City* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909); Annie Marion MacLean, *Wage-Earning Women* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910); Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, "Working-Girls' Budgets," *McClure's Magazine* 36, no. 1 (November 1910): 70–86, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.47963802?urlappend=%3Bseq=78%3Bownerid=13510798902658783-92> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.47963802?urlappend=%3Bseq=78%3Bownerid=13510798902658783-92> >; Mary White Ovington, "The Colored Woman as a Bread Winner," in *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 138–169; State of New York, *Third Report of the Factory Investigating Commission, 1914* (Albany: J. B. Lyon Co. Printers, 1914), 100–101, 143–166, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0cv4dp3q> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0cv4dp3q> >; Mary Van Kleeck, *Women in the Bookbinding Trade* (New York, Survey Associates, Inc., 1913), 72–100; Harriet McDoual Daniels, *The Girl and Her Chance: A Study of Conditions Surrounding the Young Girl Between Fourteen and Eighteen Years of Age in New York City* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company), 11–13, 44–77, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t9765dr1q> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t9765dr1q> >; Charles E. Persons, "Women's Work and Wages in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 29, no. 2 (February, 1915): 201–234, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1884958> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/1884958> >; Simkhovitch, *The City Worker's World*, 54–59. ↵
17. Maude E. Miner, *Slavery of Prostitution: A Plea for Emancipation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 297, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433075969083> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433075969083> >. ↵
18. Miner, *Slavery of Prostitution*, 77. See also Simkhovitch, *The City Worker's World*, 130. ↵
19. On the practice of "standing treat" or "charity," see Israels, "The Way," 487–489; Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, "A New Social Adjustment," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 1, no. 1 (October 1910): 87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1171699> < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1171699> >; Chicago Vice Commission, *The Social Evil in Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions with Recommendations by the Vice Commission of Chicago: A Municipal Body Appointed by the Mayor and the City Council of the City of Chicago, and Submitted as its Report to the Mayor and City Council of Chicago* (Chicago: Gunthorp-Warren Print Company, 1911), 267, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/002172977/catalog> < <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/002172977/catalog> >; Winthrop D. Lane, "Under Cover of Respectability: Some Disclosures of Immorality Among Unsuspected Men and Women," *The Survey* 35, no. 26 (March 25, 1916): 746, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101066882786?urlappend=%3Bseq=788%3Bownerid=27021597767051255-888> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101066882786?urlappend=%3Bseq=788%3Bownerid=27021597767051255-888> >; John G. Buchanan, "War Legislation against Alcoholic Liquor and Prostitution," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 9, no. 4 (February 1919): 526, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1134127> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/1134127> >; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 311; Kathy Peiss, "Charity Girls and City Pleasures," *Magazine of History* 18, no. 4 (July 2004): 14–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/18.4.14> < <https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/18.4.14> >; Clement, *Love for Sale*. Some Progressive Era social scientists argued that the use of such terminology by reformers and social workers to describe emergent dating norms was inappropriate. For English sexologist Havelock Ellis, for instance, to use the term "charity girls" when referring to young women who engaged in extramarital intimacy was to "accept the prostitute's standpoint." Havelock Ellis to Frederick H. Whitin, July 16, 1925, "Ellis, Havelock," Box 11, Committee of Fourteen records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (hereafter "C14"). ↵
20. On the COF's wartime contributions to the federal government's policing of sexual and moral conditions near military camps for the War Department's Commission on Training Camp Activities, see William F. Sloane to the Committee of Fourteen, May 23, 1917, "Pfeiffer, Timothy N.," Box 24, C14; Captain Timothy N. Pfeiffer to Francis Louis Slade, September 4, 1917, "Pfeiffer, Timothy N.," Box 24, C14; Committee of Fourteen, *Annual Report for 1916–1917* (New York, 1918), 7–10, 15–20. COF member Maude E. Miner organized and chaired the Commission's committee on Protective Work for Girls. See Maude E. Miner, "The Girl Problem in War Time," *General Federation Magazine* 17, no. 5 (May 1918): 13–14; Edna Huber Church, "Women Police of

- Military Camps Helping to Win the War," *South Bend News-Times*, May 20, 1918, 9, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87055779/1918-05-20/ed-1/seq-9/> < <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87055779/1918-05-20/ed-1/seq-9/>>; Maude Miner Hadden, *Quest for Peace: Personal and Political* (Washington, D.C.: Farrar, 1968), 161–176. ↵
21. On the relation between wartime prohibition and demobilization, see A Woman War Worker, "Our Bad Boys in France," *New York Times Magazine*, August 24, 1919, 7, <https://nyti.ms/3ZhpT1l> < [https://urldefense.com/v3/https://nyti.ms/3ZhpT1l;!!KwNVngRv!HkPLPXJxrMjn47K9EARVxY0-BZG9GIEC2F3nEITXpmH7KCp0cgsLYhD8gshFDA84YKaLjB72Z73LBHY\\$>](https://urldefense.com/v3/https://nyti.ms/3ZhpT1l;!!KwNVngRv!HkPLPXJxrMjn47K9EARVxY0-BZG9GIEC2F3nEITXpmH7KCp0cgsLYhD8gshFDA84YKaLjB72Z73LBHY$>). Buchanan, "War Legislation." On demobilization and "demoralization," see Philip Gibbs, "Effects of the War on Soldiers' Minds," *New York Times*, June 1, 1919, Section 4, 1, <https://nyti.ms/3H5pk0x> < <https://nyti.ms/3H5pk0x>>. On shifts in New York City's clandestine sexual economy wrought by wartime prohibition and the COF's quest to track them, see Austin Gallas, "The Price of the Ride in New York City: Sex, Taxis, and Entrepreneurial Resilience in the Dry Season of 1919," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 31, no. 1 (January 2022): 89–114, <https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs31104> < <https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs31104>>. On the wartime panic over "venereal disease" and promiscuity, see especially William F. Snow, "Social Hygiene and the War," *Social Hygiene* 3, no. 3 (July 1917): 417–428, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3154437?urlappend=%3Bseq=439%3Bownerid=9007199274480081-453> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3154437?urlappend=%3Bseq=439%3Bownerid=9007199274480081-453>>; John D. Rockefeller, Jr., "U.S. First to Organize Morally Against Enemy," *Trench and Camp* (Admiral, Maryland), December 26, 1917, 7, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92068220/1917-12-26/ed-1/seq-7/> < <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92068220/1917-12-26/ed-1/seq-7/>>; Raymond B. Fosdick, "The Program of the Commission of Training Camp Activities with Relation to the Problem of Venereal Disease," *Social Hygiene* 4, no. 1 (January 1918): 71–76, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3154438?urlappend=%3Bseq=91%3Bownerid=9007199274480306-95> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3154438?urlappend=%3Bseq=91%3Bownerid=9007199274480306-95>>; Seale Harris, "G. H. Q. Bulletin No. 54 on the Venereal Disease Problem," *Social Hygiene* 5, no. 3 (July 1919): 301–309, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3154439?urlappend=%3Bseq=313%3Bownerid=9007199274480547-341> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3154439?urlappend=%3Bseq=313%3Bownerid=9007199274480547-341>>. ↵
  22. Winthrop D. Lane, "Girls and Khaki," *The Survey* 39, no. 9 (December 1, 1917): 236, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013338176?urlappend=%3Bseq=252%3Bownerid=13510798884828139-272> < <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013338176?urlappend=%3Bseq=252%3Bownerid=13510798884828139-272>>. See also Miner, "The Girl Problem," 15–16. ↵
  23. Older criminological narratives emphasizing individual failure persisted, however. See especially Terry G. Lilley, Chrysanthi S. Leon, and Anne E. Bowler, "The Same Old Arguments: Tropes of Race and Class in the History of Prostitution from the Progressive Era to the Present," *Social Justice* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 33, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2439672126> < <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2439672126>>. ↵
  24. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 178. ↵
  25. John Willis Slaughter, quoted in "Plans for Dry New York," *New York Times Magazine*, June 8, 1919, 2, <https://nyti.ms/3Emss6c> < <https://nyti.ms/3Emss6c>>. ↵
  26. Belle Lindner Israels, "Regulation of Public Amusements," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 2, no. 4 (July 1912): 126, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171971> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171971>>. In Israels's words, "industrial activity demands diversion." Israels, "The Way," 486. For related Progressive theorizations of recreation, see Frances A. Kellor, "Protection of Immigrant Women," *Atlantic Monthly* 101, no. 2 (February 1908): 253, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/203576464> < <https://www.proquest.com/docview/203576464>>; Lee F. Hanmer, "A Playground Meeting with Real Play," *The Survey* 26, no. 9 (May 27, 1911): 333–337, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924065807103>

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27. Belle Lindner Israels, quoted in "Dance Halls to Prove Vice Is Not Fun's Real Comrade," *New York Tribune*, December 22, 1912, 4, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1912-12-22/ed-1/seq-24/> < <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1912-12-22/ed-1/seq-24/> >. See "Supervision of the Dance Restaurants Frequented by Middle Class Girls (and their Mothers) is the Most Immediate Need of New York, According to Mrs. Henry Moskowitz," *New York Tribune*, May 27, 1915, 7, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1915-05-27/ed-1/seq-7/> < <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1915-05-27/ed-1/seq-7/> >. ↵
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72. Report on "Steamer Benj. B. Odell, Central Hudson Line," July 27, 1919, "Steamboats," Box 24, C14 (hereafter "Benj. B. Odell, C14"). ↵
73. On COF investigators' writing and recording practices, see Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 78. ↵
74. Report of David Oppenheim, "Street Conditions, Manhattan," April 3, 1919, "1919 #3," Box 34, C14; report of David Oppenheim on Orange Grove de Dance, April 9, 1919, "1919 #3," Box 34, C14. ↵
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76. Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 77, 82. ↵
77. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. ↵
78. Heap, *Slumming*, 67. ↵
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80. Israels, "The Way," 492. ↵
81. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. ↵
82. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. ↵
83. Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 82. ↵
84. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. Relatedly, according to Wallace, "excursion boats to Albany and New Haven were notorious for the blatant behavior of onboard purveyors of sexual services" during this period. Mike Wallace, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898 to 1919* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 605. ↵
85. Interestingly, the Cambridge Hotel was already known by the COF's leaders. In the fall of 1914, two COF undercover investigators, with the assistance of the COF's general secretary, Frederick H. Whitin, collected evidence that contributed to the conviction of the hotel's owner on a charge of keeping a disorderly house. Whitin testified in court that couples without baggage were illegally admitted by the clerk and that addresses were not properly recorded on the hotel register. The owner was issued a \$100 fine. *People of the State of New York v. Charles C. Schultz*, 169 A.D. 963 (1915). ↵
86. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. ↵
87. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. ↵
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90. "Benj. B. Odell," C14. ↵

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# Author Information



## Austin Gallas

Austin Gallas recently earned a PhD in Cultural Studies from George Mason University, where he currently teaches in the Department of Communication. His dissertation is titled "Value of Surveillance: Private Policing, Bourgeois Reform, and Sexual Commerce in Turn-of-the-Century New York." Austin's current research interests include undercover surveillance in New York City history, Progressive Era urban police reform, American literary journalism during prohibition, and the sexual and gender politics of the American minimum wage debate of the 1910s.

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## Article details

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## Introduction: Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

by Alyson Patsavas and Theodora Danylevich | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022),  
Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” takes up a thread from disability justice writer, educator, and organizer Mia Mingus to assemble an archive that “leaves evidence” and captures experience emergent from crip lives and life in the pandemic. The need to gather, hold space for, and preserve evidence—of our angers, our fears, our griefs, our joys, our pleasures, our communities, and our lives—has, for many of us, never felt more urgent. In this editorial introduction to the first installment of the special section of *Lateral*, “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry,” we narrate project origins in response to pervasive and obfuscating crisis rhetorics, feelings of indignation, and a desire to gather and preserve evidence of crip life and crip knowledge from within the context of the pandemic. “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” offers a unique digital archive that brings together creative and scholarly reflections to document the experiences of disabled people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The collection includes a multimodal introductory roundtable; multimedia projects; digital renditions of sculptures, masks, fiber arts, and zines; critical interrogations of pandemic politics and policies; and theorizations of crip sociality. This editorial introduction is our brief overview and invitation for readers to travel through spacetimes, bear witness to, and be cared for by this tapestry, archive, collection.

**KEYWORDS** disability studies, crip, archive, care, pandemic, COVID-19, access

This project began with indignation and is entering the world with tenderness—at least, with a tenderness that twines with indignation.<sup>1</sup> In the first few months of 2021, we were wrapping up the final edits of our introduction to the “Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present” < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis>> special section of *Lateral*’s Spring 2021 issue. That collection of essays had been several years in the making and, thus, long predated the pandemic. Yet, we acutely felt the relevance of the “Cripistemologies of Crisis” contributors’ work to the pandemic moment.<sup>2</sup> Crisis rhetoric was all around us. Of course, it is hard to deny the collective sense of urgency of the last few years, shaped by the confluences of the global pandemic, growing climate catastrophe, emboldened white supremacy, on-going and newly launched wars and land occupations, and the rise of far-right populism across the globe. Despite its—at

times—descriptive value, the exceptionalist undertones of crisis rhetoric can also enact particularly violent erasures of lived experience. In reflecting on the impetus for the collection, Theodora recalled thinking, “What about those of us whose lives and living conditions are constantly cycling through crises? Your crisis rhetoric is insulting to us.” It is insulting because the exceptionalism of such rhetoric invokes a fantasy of universalized normalcy and stability—suddenly interrupted. It is not only insulting, but dangerous in its erasure of and invalidation of the daily lived experiences of entire groups of people. Further, notions of the “unprecedented” nature of crisis produce and elevate many types of professional and institutionally-located experts while invisibilizing and/or making impossible experiential knowledge and expertise.<sup>3</sup> Gathering evidence of the proliferation of ongoing, preexisting, and evolving cripistemologies of crisis felt all the more necessary to meet this moment of urgency. And so, we began talking about the need for a space to collect crip pandemic experiences.

As many disabled and chronically ill folks have noted, the earlier stages of the pandemic brought an eerie sense that the crip spacetime so many of us live in—with its isolations, negotiated vulnerabilities, unique temporalities, and ongoing adaptations—suddenly became commonplace.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, this created an opening for a recognition of crip crisis knowledge—or perhaps more accurately, a turn to crip crisis competencies, in a particular desire to operationalize crip knowledge.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, even as disabled and chronically-ill folks tried to leverage this opening, the emphasis on the moment’s exceptionality tempered many of our hopes that the mass entry into crip spacetime would produce any systemic adoption of anti-ableist policies or practices, much less a sudden recognition of the crip knowledge, wisdom, and value. As Mimi Khúc notes in “Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes,” a roundtable that we convened to introduce the collection, “many of us have learned [lessons from the pandemic], but not all of us. And definitely not our institutions.” It felt strange, then, to be working towards the publication of “Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present,” knowing the very institutions that needed—and in some cases said they wanted—our knowledge would not create space to cultivate it.<sup>6</sup>

The already inaccessible publication pressures and timelines, for instance, ramped up to an even greater degree of inhospitality with the collective sense of urgency, particularly for work on and about COVID-19, to come out in a “timely” fashion. Working from overwhelmed, traumatized, sick, and pained bodyminds, we felt and knew the gap between those who were able to use the pandemic times to produce more prolifically, and those whose reflections and experiences could not “keep pace” with such crisis temporalities. We felt and knew the additional space, time, and care required for our sense-making to unfold. And we knew, because we felt, the always already present risk that crucial disabled, chronically-ill, mad, and neuro-divergent knowledge would be lost due to both the literal

loss of life that the pandemic caused and the loss of already precarious places, spaces, and conditions for sharing such knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In short, the very conditions of felt, lived experience that have produced crip knowledge are the very conditions that the pandemic heightened. Paradoxically, these are the same conditions that threaten to obscure that same knowledge.

These reflections led us to propose "Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry" as a way to enact, as we understood it, a cripistemology of crisis practice: the creation of a space for disabled, crip, and chronically-ill folks to rest their knowledge and experience. We wrote the following call for papers with this purpose in mind:

The COVID-19 pandemic has both underscored and amplified the forms of ableism, racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, and transphobia that measure lives and deaths differentially. As a result, many disabled, chronically, and disabled-adjacent people have found ourselves negotiating intensified levels of grief, precarity, risk, fear, isolation, and anger. Long-tacit necropolitical practices (marking some lives for death) became explicit and institutionalized in medical rationing/refusals of care, reopening plans, vaccine distributions, declarations of the pandemic's end, and rhetoric positioning deaths of entire generations of communities as acceptable "prices to pay." The present, in other words, reminds us of how crip futures remain marked by supposedly past eugenic practices and abandonment.

In the face of this dizzying and disorientating reality, many of us (re)turn to community knowledge and shared survival skills to live through this and other ongoing and cyclical crises. Crip knowledge plays a crucial role in sustaining lives, care, and relationality amid state-sponsored neglect. Yet, the conditions of created and perpetuated crises often make such knowledge as precarious as it is precious. In an effort to capture and "archive" these insights, Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry takes up a thread from disability justice writer, educator, and organizer Mia Mingus to assemble a collection of evidence and experience emergent from crip lives and life in the pandemic. As Mingus writes: "We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached." A need to gather, hold space for, and preserve evidence—of our angers, our fears, our griefs, our joys, our pleasures, our communities, and our lives—has, for many of us, never felt more urgent.

And people responded.

## A Tapestry, An Archive, A Collection

"Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry" assembles the responses to our call for crip evidence into a digital collection that will be released across two issues (the second part to appear in Spring 2023). The collection draws on insights from critical disability studies and disability justice to crip both dominant pandemic discourses and scholarship more broadly, embracing knowledge-making across media.<sup>8</sup> Its scope brings together established, junior,

and independent scholars as well as students, artists, and culture workers, weaving together a textured tapestry of experiences that individually and collectively leaves evidence of the lives of disabled people.<sup>9</sup> The pieces within the collection provide evidence of survival and crip modes of thriving during a pandemic with disproportionate and devastating impacts; evidencing a vibrancy and urgency of crip life and theorizing in the context of the pandemic. To round out these prefatory remarks, we offer below: a note on absences as a presence that shapes the collection, a description of our introductory roundtable, a clustered and annotated list of the individual contributions that appear in this installment, and a closing invocation.

Even as we embrace the community of contributors who came forward, we acknowledge that evidencing crip pandemic lives through publication, archiving, and curation also requires degrees of access: networks through which to connect, share, and preserve. The tapestry that we lay out in the collection is, thus, marked by the privileges of an academic and cultural network through which our call for submissions was distributed. While it does feature many who occupy tenuous positions within these privileged spaces—students, contingent faculty, independent scholars, artists, and community workers—the absences in the tapestry are notable. The very precariousness of the lives and experiences that our call sought to address falls with particular acuteness on BIPOC disabled and chronically-ill folks. The present installment of our tapestry-archive lacks—and desires—more voices from Black disabled folks; scholars, artists, and thinkers from the global south; incarcerated and/or institutionalized people; refugees; indigenous voices; those disabled by war and climate crisis; and those newly disabled from long-COVID.<sup>10</sup> The silences and gaps of those disabled and chronically ill lives lost and those too sick, too isolated, too pained, or too fatigued to actively offer their accounts, experiences, and wisdom to this collective project also demand acknowledgement. As you go through the collection, we invite you to hold space for these absences and gaps, as they irrevocably haunt and shape our collective experiences.

We open the issue with an introductory roundtable conversation where we gathered experts whose scholarship, curation, organizing, and artistic work center crip insights and creativity. Participants in the discussion—Margaret Fink, Aimi Hamraie, Mimi Khúc, and Sandie Yi—reviewed the Crip Pandemic Life section in advance. We held the roundtable as a Zoom conversation, during which we invited Fink, Hamraie, Khúc, and Yi to reflect on their work and the pandemic's impact on it. We then asked everyone to comment on the section as a whole and reflect on what struck or moved them most. "Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes," serves as an affective portal into the collection, our process, and our community. It is also a multimodal archive of the roundtable, including a full videorecording with captions and a transcript,<sup>11</sup> and a lightly-edited text-only version of this roundtable conversation. At the end of "Crip Pandemic

Conversation," readers will also find a glossary, a contribution led by Corbin Outlaw, which includes short, contextualizing definitions of words or concepts that appear in the roundtable conversation. Offering video, audio, and textual ways into this introduction sets the tone for the importance of the multiplicities of form found within the section itself. Providing its own type of pandemic evidence, we have left in the awkward zoom moments of unmuted microphones, re-takes, dropped calls, and awkward silences in the audiovisual file and associated transcript. These brief moments aside, the relatively smoothness of the conversation also bears witness to and archives the knowledge of virtual access leveraged and sharpened through the pandemic: the practice of participants announcing themselves when speaking, the care of sharing the space, and the best setup for ASL interpreters. In the introductory roundtable, Aimi Hamraie asks, "Is there a disability studies norm that is emerging in which our academic contributions also necessarily take on these many different forms and embody practices of care?" As readers choose their preferred way of engaging with "Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes," we invite you to consider how access practices such as transcripts, Zoom recordings, and captions might produce and embody a caring archive.

The introductory roundtable discusses material that appears in both Issues 11.2 (Fall 2022) and 12.1 (Spring 2023) of *Lateral*. The first installment consists of fifteen contributions. We have grouped contributions into three rough categories: praxis projects, essays, and creative works. These categories are not mutually exclusive; some praxis projects include poetry and some essays describe praxis work. A number of themes and threads proliferate and interconnect the pieces across these forms, joining into a heterogeneous tapestry, archive, collection of varying textures and affects.<sup>12</sup> Contributions are collectively-authored and single-authored; visual and textual; narrative and fragmentary: linear, recombinant, and accretive. Across categories, contributions include and interleave a number of poems, photographic collage, painting, knitting, sculpture, different types of mask-making projects, as well as reflective essays and transcribed conversations. Readers looking for a more thematic discussion of the collection will find this in the introductory roundtable, as participants draw out the threads of smallness, grief, community-building, tenderness, and pandemic coping tools or, as Sandie Yi describes, "[crip] family recipes."

The praxis projects include contributions that offer up evidence of community care practices. For instance, Pau Abustan's "Surviving and Thriving: Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa Dream Worlds in Animal Crossings New Horizons (ACNH)" documents and reflects on a utopic convening and caretaking that took place among crip friends and colleagues in the digital game-world, creating moments of "comfy cozy" solace and joy amid pandemic stress and isolation. Sherri Liska, Katrissa Singer, Emily Gillespie, Sheryl Peters and Patty Douglas contribute "Autistic, Surviving and Thriving Under COVID-19: Imagining Inclusive Autistic Futures—A Zine Making Project by the Re•Storying Autism Collective," which

documents and reflects upon a collective, remote zine-making project that brings together an international community of autistic folks and allies, artists, and kin working toward disability justice. "Coalition-In-Progress: Found Poetry Through Phone Calls with People Labeled/With Intellectual Disability During the COVID-19 Pandemic" describes and evidences the connectivity enacted through phone calls between folks labeled/with intellectual disabilities and research/allies. In doing so, Erin Kuri, Antoinette, A. K., Bill Chase, Cindy Scott, Doreen Kalifer, Harold George Dougall, Kevin John Head, Marie, Nicholas Herd, P. A. I., P. S., R., S. S., Chelsea Jones, and Ann Fudge Schormans provide an invaluable snapshot into community building through digital divides deepened by the pandemic. Each of these projects communicate a defiant sociality in light of pandemic isolation, undoing erasures of social formations emergent from autistic folks and people labeled/with intellectual disabilities. Alison Kopit and Sandie Yi's "A Dialogue and Reflection about the Masks for Crips Project" stages a reflective conversation between the two authors, interwoven with photographic images, to document their local, disability justice-driven mask-making and distribution project. Julie Dind's "Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Handbook (and an Autistic Manifesto)" exemplifies a tactile and texture-driven engagement with crisis isolation, presenting work that brings together zine, manifesto, and memorial of origami swans with a "how to" guide to making masks stitched from dried daikon peel. There is a time-capsule-like urgency of and for the making of DIY personal protective equipment and masks as artifacts of a fraught moment in the early pandemic, which Kopit and Yi's together with Dind's contributions encapsulate in different ways: a disability justice community creation and distribution project on the one hand, and an autistic meltdown *cum* creative protest art, on the other.

Essay contributions theorize and reflect on experiences and range from intimate memoir-style accounts to interpretive-analytical pieces, to collective dreaming and critiquing in transcribed conversations: Jessie Male's "How do you Grieve During an Apocalypse?" shares a devastating and tender tribute that offers an experiential theorization of grief, memoir, and lived moments of disabled kinship. In doing so, Male's piece demands and refashions the space and time of a memorial refused by pandemic isolations and COVID protocols. On the other hand, Jiya Pandya's "On Navigating Paranoia, Repair, and Ambivalence as Crip Pandemic Affects, Or, I'm So Paranoid, I Think Your Covid Test Is About Me" poses the question, "what is pandemic theorizing?" Pandya turns to the individual, sensory, physical and psychic modalities of paranoia to chew on "its temporalities, impacts, limits, and alternatives" in ways that draw from and extend scholarship on affect, "ugly feelings," and reparative work.<sup>13</sup> S. Cavar's "The Queer Aut of Failure: Cripistemic Openings for Postgraduate Life" remarks upon and documents an autistic first-year graduate student experience of "Zoom University."<sup>14</sup> In contrast to and in wry conversation with presumed orientations of failure in relation to remote learning, Cavar insists that pandemic education has "ushered in new queercrip, transMad, ways of knowing



and teaching” that offer generative possibilities in need of cultivating. Sohini Chatterjee, Keely Grossman, Rachel Jobson, Kristen Kowlessar, and River Rossi’s “Roundtable: Crip Student Solidarity in the COVID-19 Pandemic” documents crip grad students’ collective grievances and coalitional dreaming of an accessible university, enacting these visions through their accounts of connection, care, and critique. The roundtable participants also play with form to offer multiple entry points into their text by tagging thematic points that run across their conversation, which resists reifying linear reading practices. The multiplicity of graduate student voices that unfolds—both in this roundtable and in conversation with Cavar’s text—also complicates any singular, flattened, or universalized view of “grad student pandemic experiences.” Collectively, these essays model how to write, think, and feel with grief, grievance, paranoia, contestation, and failure for their generativity without revaluing, eliding, or obscuring the complex realities of these experiences.

Creative works include poetry and visual, sculpted, and crafted contributions. Mick Jones and Dana Fennell contribute a collaborative poetry-and-sculpture dyad, “OCD and Our Thoughts,” shedding light on how COVID prevention protocols brushed up against OCD experiences. Jones’s poem opens with “I’ve been down this road before,” and sits in conversation with the sculpture and with Fennell and Jones’s contextualizing reflection to capture the cyclical features of fear, doubts, and hopes that the pandemic tapped into. Additional poetry contributions include Carmen Cutler’s “Chronic Illness Wisdom is Both/And,” which addresses the knowledge that the chronically ill community has to offer in the context of a mass-disabling pandemic. Cutler’s piece reminds us of the centrality of multiplicity and ambiguity within crip and chronic illness life. Jennifer Scuro’s “August 2020” expresses a small but haunting moment between mother and sleeping child at the height of the pandemic—devastating, as Mimi Khúc puts it in the introductory roundtable. In “Security Blanket: Neuroqueer Knitting in Pandemic Times,” Rebecca-Eli Long documents the process of making a massive knitted blanket, framing it as an expression and validation of autistic joy and defiant autistic meaning-making. Drawing on a queer-feminist understanding of fiber arts as a mode of community- and meaning-making, Long conceptualizes a politicized “neuroqueer knitting” as a rhetorical praxis. Sam Fein contributes a painting, “Overwhelmed,” expressing ways in which isolation served as a particularly triggering spacetime for those with histories of forced confinement and institutionalization. A complement to pieces like Abustan’s and Cavar’s, which detail relief and joy that come from virtual, mediated realms and spaces, Fein’s piece serves as “a really important reminder that we can’t just valorize remoteness,” and that for folks “who have connections to histories of institutionalization, it can actually be really inaccessible or bring up a lot,” as Aimi Hamraie observes in the introductory roundtable. “assembly required: textures of madness, joy, memory,” by Sav Schlauderaff, documents and reflects upon creative work that includes crafting, poetry, photography, and painting, processing C-PTSD

and Childhood Sexual Assault (CSA) memories, meditating on mending methodologies. In doing so, Schlauderaff tracks the ongoing, difficult work of (re)assembly required when negotiating trauma—work that for many simultaneously predates, was made possible by, and will outlast the pandemic. For others, the pandemic brought new forms of ambiguity, grief, and/or trauma. Much like the praxis projects, the creative works gathered here offer salves, resonances, and connectivities for making crip sense—and an archive—of these experiences.

Throughout *"Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry,"* objects, poems, images, vivid anecdotal accounts, and conversations make available for us experiences of the textural sensations of making things, the tenderness of grief, the indignation and rage at the devaluation of crip life, and the expansiveness of joy in shared moments of access. They invite community, share wisdom, concretize and archive ephemeral conversations from a very specific moment—when the whole world was fixed into a crip spacetime and yet left it behind as soon as it became possible for some to do so. These contributions, as a tapestry and as an archive, bridge spacetimes and enact coalitional care and evidence. They bring together, in the same frame, institutional and community spaces, scholarly spaces, bedspaces and virtual worlds, memory and dream spaces. This work evidences not only moments in time, but offers a portal for "time-travel," providing readers and community members with asynchronous access to crip culture and community building.<sup>15</sup> Many of the practices and reflections documented here were crucial to contributors' survival in the first years of the pandemic. Creating a space for this work to live and connect with new people both honors it and extends that survival work, opening up the potential for community building across time and space. As an animate and affective cripistemological tapestry, the pieces relate to one another and to those who encounter and engage, read, or otherwise come in contact with this collection.

In closing, *"Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry"* is just a small part of a much larger, collective project of honoring and capturing crip knowledge. It joins a much wider and growing body of work that accounts for (and demands accountability to) disabled and chronically ill pandemic experiences.<sup>16</sup> In joining this effort, we take up the threads woven both by our roundtable participants and by folks like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, who describes the urgency of documenting crip survival genius that the pandemic activated and made visible to the world in new (and complicated) ways. We also invite readers to learn as much as we have from the contributors' pieces by paying particular attention to the multiplicity of genealogies of this collective knowledge that they trace in their work. Our dreams for *"Crip Pandemic Life,"* are that it offers a space where contributors, roundtable participants, editors, readers collectively witness, grieve, and rage together—a launching point for visioning and creating together in ways that not only allow but welcome "forms of knowledge incommensurate with a sentence that says words," as Margaret Fink put it in the

introductory roundtable. Put another way, we have what Sandie Yi describes as flavors, family recipes, and crisis-coping models.<sup>17</sup> As Aly Patsavas put it, the pieces in this collection dwell together in “dreaming and imagining and sort of declaring” caring archives: We invite you in—to interact, to find solace, to find your family recipes, to reimagine our world.

## Acknowledgements

Noting, collecting, and sharing evidence of disabled and chronically ill lives is, itself, work. It requires time, energy, and security—all things that are privileged resources in the best of times. Working with and from disabled and chronically-ill bodyminds often means working in starts and fits, working with multiple deadline horizons, and recognizing how to communicate these from places of care, vulnerability, and support. We often failed. When we did, we benefited from the crip politics shared by each other, our contributors, and the *Lateral* team, all of whom met overdue updates, miscommunications, and changed plans with understanding and generosity.

This project has been generously supported by the University of Illinois Chicago. The Institute for the Humanities “Humanities Innovation Grant” made the introductory roundtable conversation possible, and the “Creative Activity Award” has supported the finalization of the project and efforts to amplify its reach through social media.

## Notes

1. Mimi Khúc, in the section’s introductory roundtable “Crip Pandemic Conversation”, ends our discussion with a meditation on and an invocation towards tenderness. Our conversation centering the work in the collection brought us through indignation to a place of tenderness and care, buoyed by community—both the community of the conversation, and the community that the contributions to Crip Pandemic Life create. ↩
2. Alyson Spurgas, Jess Whatcott, and Angela Carter each offered deeply thoughtful (and long-developed) pieces reflecting on the insights garnered from precisely such overwhelmed, traumatized, sick, and pained positionalities of crip, queer, and BIPOC folks navigating “crisis” states, both acute and on-going. See Angela M. Carter, “When Silence Said Everything: Reconceptualizing Trauma through Critical Disability Studies,” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.8> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.8>> ; Alyson Spurgas, “Solidarity in Falling Apart: Toward a Crip, Collectivist, and Justice-Seeking Theory of Feminine Fracture,” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.9> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.9>> ; Jess Whatcott, “Crip Collectivity Beyond Neoliberalism in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.10> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.10>> . ↩
3. The nomination of Dr. Anthony Fauci for Sexiest Man of the Year in 2020 offers just one example of the cultural validation and elevation of infectious disease expertise; see Julie Mazziotta, “Fauci Jokes that Being Nominated for PEOPLE’s Sexiest Man Alive Was an ‘Interesting Concept,’” *People*, March 15, 2021, <https://people.com/health/fauci-jokes-being-nominated-peoples-sexiest-man-alive-an-interesting-concept/> < <https://people.com/health/fauci-jokes-being-nominated-peoples-sexiest-man-alive-an-interesting-concept/>> . ↩

4. Crip spacetime is a term theorized in Margaret Price, *Crip Spacetime* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming), 2; see also Margaret Price, "Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (April 2021): 257–277, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966>>. ↩
5. We are being deliberately playful with the refashioning of crip knowledge into a more corporatized "crip competency" language to nod to the somewhat awkward and often complicated adaptation of crip knowledge on a larger (even institutionalized) scale. ↩
6. At the same time, it was not that strange nor that new, given the ways in which academia has been posturing a desire for the "hot new field" of disability studies while denying faculty accommodations or necessary grace as we navigate disabled life. ↩
7. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha talks about the precariousness of disabled, mad, and chronically-ill knowledge extensively in *The Future is Disabled*. They cite Corbette O'Toole, who says, "Every disabled leader who dies takes a library of knowledge with them that they often didn't have the time to write down" (40). Piepzna-Samarasinha notes, explicitly, that the urgency of capturing crip knowledge, particularly BIPOC crip knowledge, predates the pandemic but highlights how "2019–2021 were the 'name a disabled fat BIPOC who wasn't murdered by the MIC during a pandemic' years" (40). *The Future is Disabled*, as a whole, offers a guidebook, treasure manifesto of disability justice and crip wisdom. Please turn to this book for its deep reflection on loss, mourning, and knowledge preservation as community-honoring work. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022). ↩
8. Crip, here, draws from Carrie Sandahl's articulation of its verb form: to reveal presumptions and preferences for able-bodied in order to remake them. See Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip, Crippling the Queer," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Quarterly: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance* 9, no. 1 (2003): 25–56, [muse.jhu.edu/article/40804](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40804) < <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40804>> ; see also Aimi Hamraie's discussion of "knowing-making" and knowledge as "a kind of design" (10) in Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). ↩
9. See Mia Mingus, *Leaving Evidence* (blog), <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>>. ↩
10. We are grateful to our reviewer for noting this and encouraging us to acknowledge these absences. ↩
11. Readers should note that this transcript is only slightly different from the text of the introductory roundtable itself, but the transcript does include all the conversational moments that were edited out for readability in the text-only version. ↩
12. We are including each of these descriptors because they are gestural and reflect an ongoing and unsettled conversation about how to describe the work as a whole. In keeping with the importance of multiplicity, we retain them all here. For readers who wish us to reconcile these terms, this is as close as we can get: Crip Pandemic Life is a tapestry, which we discuss as a collection that is also archival in a way that is vital to leaving evidence of and offering a portal into the crip community. ↩
13. "Ugly feelings" is Sianne Ngai's term: Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6–7. ↩
14. "Zoom University" is how Cavar refers to the spacetime of all-remote learning in higher education. ↩
15. "Time-travel" is a reference to Ellen Samuels discussion of crip time as a form of time travel. See Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways to Look at Crip Time," *DSQ: Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684> < <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684>>. ↩

16. New York University's Center for Disability Studies's "Disability Covid Chronicles" offers an amazing (and ongoing) collection of experiences of disabled and chronically ill people that similarly builds an archive of stories: NYU Center for Disability Studies, "Disability Covid Chronicles," December 9 2022, <https://disabilitycovidchronicles.nyu.edu> <<https://disabilitycovidchronicles.nyu.edu/>>; see also: Mel Chen, "Feminisms in the Air," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 1 (Autumn 2021): 22–29, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/715733> <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/715733>>; Jessica A. Cooley and Ann Fox, "Becoming Indisposable: Curating Disability in a Time of Pandemic," in *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation*, ed. Amanada Cachia (New York: Routledge, 2022), 32–44, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003171935-4> <<https://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003171935-4>>; Faye Ginsburg, Mara Mills, and Rayna Rapp, "The 'Swell': Disability Arts in the Time of COVID-19," in Cachia, *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation*, 17–31, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003171935-3>; Piepnza-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*; Alice Wong and Joseph Stramondo, "Ethics Talk: Disability Community Perspectives on COVID-19," *AMA Journal of Ethics: Illuminating the Art of Medicine*, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/podcast/ethics-talk-disability-community-perspectives-covid-19>. ↩
17. Yi's description appears in the introductory roundtable. ↩

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Alyson Patsavas is Assistant Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). Her scholarship is situated at the intersections of disability studies, queer theory, and feminist theory and focuses on cultural discourses of pain, disability, and crip epistemologies, as well as representations of disability and chronic illness in popular culture. Patsavas is a writer and producer on the documentary film *Code of the Freaks* (2020). Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Somatechnics*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Crip Magazine*, *Feminist Wire*, the *Czech Sociological Review*, and *Lateral*.

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## Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes

by Alyson Patsavas, Theodora Danylevich, Margaret Fink, Aimi Hamraie, Mimi Khúc, Sandie Yi and Corbin Outlaw | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** “Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes,” brings together experts whose scholarship, curation, organizing and artistic work centers crip insights and creativity to reflect on the work that “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” undertakes. Margaret Fink, Aimi Hamraie, Mimi Khúc, and Sandie Yi each discuss how the pandemic impacted their work, and they join section co-editors Alyson Patsavas and Theodora Danylevich in discussing the tapestry’s content. Their conversation pulls out some of the most salient threads of the work: smallness, grief, care, community-building, tenderness, and pandemic coping tools. “Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes” includes an unedited video recording of a Zoom roundtable session, a lightly edited text version of the conversation, and a glossary of terms that appear in the discussion, as a contextualizing access tool located at the bottom of the document. In choosing a preferred way of engaging with the content, we invite readers to consider, as the roundtable participants themselves do, how access (transcripts, zoom recordings, and captions) produces its own caring archive and knowledge-making practices.

**KEYWORDS** disability, disability studies, crip, care, pandemic, COVID-19

## Introductory Roundtable

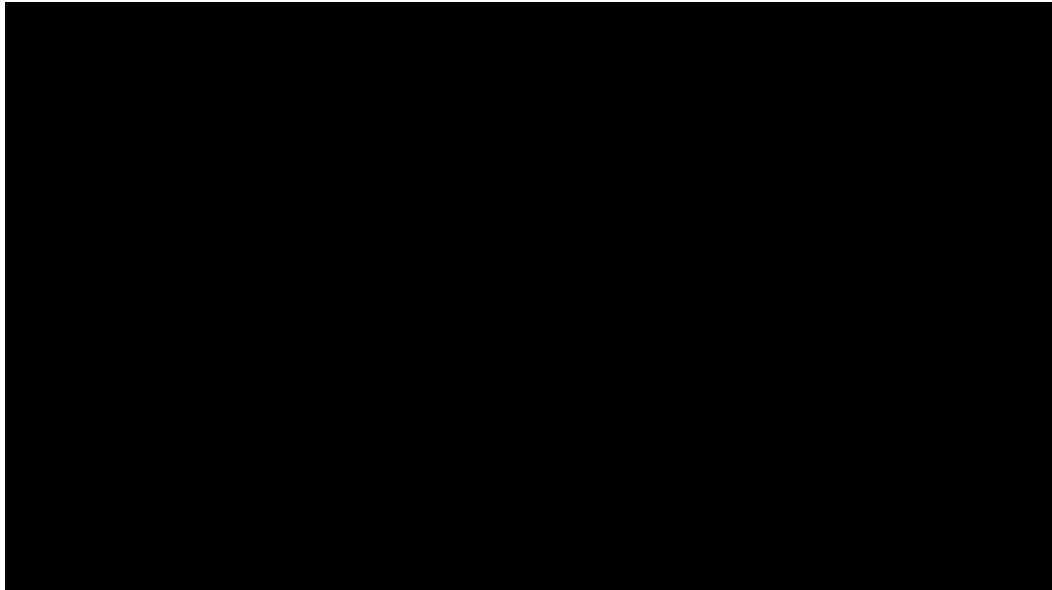
As a first possible entry point into “Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes,” as well as to the “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” collection as a whole, we include the full, unedited video-recording of the Zoom roundtable session. The video includes ASL interpreters and captions. The video is also accompanied by a downloadable, unedited transcript.

As a second possible entry point, we follow the video and transcript links with a lightly edited, text-only rendition of the conversation. We have also included a glossary that serves as a contextualizing access tool for concepts and terminology that show up in the

conversation. In the text-only rendition, when a word or term that appears in the glossary shows up, it is hyperlinked. The link takes you to the glossary entry. Using your "back" navigation function brings you back up to where you were in the text.

Video and Transcript of "Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes"

## Crip Pandemic Life Roundtable



PDF transcript < <https://ia601505.us.archive.org/21/items/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable/Crip%20Pandemic%20Life%20Roundtable%20%28transcript%29.pdf>> for roundtable video.

### Narrative Description of Video

The Zoom call is laid out with camera displays in three rows. At the start of the call, the top row, from left to right, is Aly Patsavas (she/her), Margaret Fink (she/her), and Theodora Danylevich (she/they). The middle row, from left to right, is Aimi Hamraie (they/them), an ASL interpreter, and Sandie Yi (she/her). The bottom row has Mimi Khúc (she/her) in the middle and two black screens on either side. Throughout the call, the positions of each person's video shifts, with the exception of the two black screens at the bottom left and bottom right of the call, indicating two participants who have their cameras off. At 1:16:16 <



<https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=4576>>, the top of a small Pomeranian dog shows up in Sandie's window.

## Participant Descriptions

**Alyson Patsavas:** a white person with short brown and gray hair and glasses wearing a blue sweater, sitting in front of bookshelves.

**Theodora Danylevich:** a white femme person wearing a purple plaid flannel collared shirt and messy grey-brown bun with long bangs and clear glasses; behind her is a white dry-erase board with green antennae drawn on that frame her head, to appear insect-like.

**Margaret Fink:** a white woman with long brown hair and a denim button-down shirt, sitting in an office with a lamp, plant, and chalkboard in the background.

**Aimi Hamraie:** an olive-skinned Iranian person with transmasculine gender presentation, wears a black t-shirt. They have short dark hair and rectangular glasses.

**Mimi Khúc:** femme-ish Asian American woman with very short black hair wearing a maroon shirt showing tattoos of birds on her neck and shoulder, sitting in front of a virtual background of a cafe/bakery.

**Sandie Yi:** a 40-year-old Taiwanese woman with long black hair and wearing a gray shirt against a blurred background.

**Michelle** (ASL Interpreter): a white woman with hair tied back wearing a headset with microphone attached and a black shirt.

**Faith** (ASL Interpreter): a white woman with long blond hair wearing a black shirt.

## Lightly Edited Text-Only Version

### Welcome and Overview

**Alyson Patsavas:** Welcome to the introduction for Crip Pandemic Life. This conversation serves as one possible entry point into the special section, which provides a collection of material that explores, reflects on and seeks to archive crip experiences during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

Taking part in the conversation, we are extremely fortunate to have Dr. Mimi Khúc, who is a writer, scholar and teacher of all things unwell. Her work includes *Open in Emergency*, a

hybrid book arts project decolonizing Asian American mental health, and her forthcoming book, *dear elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*, is a journey into the depths of Asian American unwellness and an exploration of new approaches to building collective care. We also have Dr. Aimi Hamraie, an Associate Professor of medicine, health and society at Vanderbilt University and director of the Critical Design Lab. A disabled, diasporic Iranian/SWANA designer and scholar, Hamraie is the author of *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, co-curator of the Crip Ritual exhibition out of Toronto in 2022, and host of the Contra\* podcast. Dr. Sandie Yi is an Assistant Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a disabled artist and culture worker whose work “Crip Couture” focuses on collecting and archiving disability narratives by collecting bodily artifacts, including skin flakes and hair. She is a Program Director of Disability Culture Activism Lab and a co-director of Bodies of Work. Dr. Margaret Fink works at UIC (University of Illinois Chicago) as the director of the Disability Cultural Center, a space devoted to building disability community, exploring social issues, and dreaming more accessible futures. Her background is in cultural studies. She’s written about comics, disability, and ordinariness, and she’s taught courses on reality TV, American literature and the mind/body distinction in trans and disability narratives.<sup>2</sup>

**Theodora Danleyvich:** As we note in the 2021 “Cripistemologies of Crisis” < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis/>> special section of *Lateral*, the conditions of created and perpetuated crises often make such knowledge as precarious as it is precious.<sup>3</sup> The essays in “Cripistemologies of Crisis” articulate the importance of building crip crisis knowledge from unstable, fractured, and hyper-empathetic crip spacetimes and lives as starting points for critical disability studies methodology in service of justice.

With this section, we have asked contributors to evidence their ephemeral and everyday modes of living and surviving. In doing so, this collection aims to build an archive—or a tapestry—that collectively addresses and exceeds the following questions:

- How do we evidence our survival, grief, loss, joy, and pain in the face of escalating and ongoing precarity, and loss?
- How have already precarious yet deeply interdependent modes of living been reshaped or reoriented in the present crisis?
- In what ways has this fostered or frustrated the inventiveness and resource sharing that are crucial to our survival?
- Alternatively, how have the conditions of our lives reframed what counts as theorizing and the stuff of knowledge production within crisis?
- How does this relate to, challenge, and crip our very understandings of evidence?
- Perhaps, putting it more plainly, what do we need to not forget?

Aimi, Sandie, Mimi, and Margaret have thought deeply about some of these core questions, navigating crisis modes; crip ingenuity; community-making; crafting survival; cultural and

creative modes of knowledge production; and leaving evidence. We invite you each in turn to reflect on how your existing practice or thinking was already engaging these questions before the pandemic, and to discuss how the pandemic reshaped or just affirmed your thinking, took it down another path, or however you might characterize that interaction of your work and our context.

Let's start with Mimi. I am so excited that we're now coming full circle here—I actually consulted with you two years ago, as we were getting this project going from just an idea into a thing.

### The Before, During, and After Times: Our Thoughts and Our Work in the Pandemic Moment(s)

**Mimi Khúc:** I remember two years ago. Was it really that long? Time is not a thing anymore. I'm super excited to be here and to talk about this project and the kinds of unwellness and care work that we have been seeing during the pandemic.

I've been thinking about unwellness for a long time now, though not always with that name. The questions that have animated my work over the last decade are "What hurts? And how do we go on living while it hurts?" *Open in Emergency* (OIE), as you mentioned before, is my book arts project on Asian American mental health. That was a creative and collaborative effort to name and capture collective unwellness, to explore its shapes, and to see how the community is finding ways to survive beyond the medical models dominant in psychology and psychiatry. So, mental health from an arts and humanities perspective.

In weird ways since OIE's emergence—that was in 2016—I've tried to track the landscape of student unwellness in particular. I've visited, at this point, dozens of universities and I've met with thousands of students as a result of *Open in Emergency*. And listening to the students has really shaped how I have thought about unwellness, as well as my current book project, forthcoming from Duke.<sup>4</sup> It has helped me develop a framework for what I call a "pedagogy of unwellness," which is the recognition that we are all differentially unwell. If you start from there—if you realize we're all unwell in different ways, in relation to the different structures in our lives—what knowledges do we gain from there? What needs do we recognize? What structures do we need to build?

So, then, cue the pandemic, which was unwellness and a crisis of care of unprecedented shape and scale. My questions felt even more urgent. Like, what does it mean to track unwellness and hurt, now? And what kinds of structures of care do we need, now?

The pandemic, for me, made the tensions of access and care in our institutions ever more acute. I saw this most clearly in the university and in the classrooms where I've been

teaching. I've been teaching at Georgetown University throughout the pandemic, with a short virtual stint at the University of California Santa Barbara. What I noticed was, early on in the pandemic, a sudden recognition of need, an expansion of access and care, and what we call accommodations, right? But I sensed an underlying kind of panic around deviating from business as usual, around not doing the normal and the normative anymore.

While I was hopeful when I first saw this expansion of accommodations, over the last year I've watched all of those things get rolled back. So we did not learn, as I had hoped, that we all have needs and should have those needs met. I was hoping that would be a lesson out of the pandemic. I think many of us have learned that, but not all of us. And definitely not our institutions.

I've seen universities and faculty double down on ableism—and so the work continues, of witnessing what hurts and finding new ways to care for those hurts. As I witnessed my own students' struggles, I realized that I myself needed to find new ways to care for my students. The classroom felt like it had transformed beyond anything I had recognized before, because of the conditions that we were expected to continue learning under. "Instructional continuity," whatever the fuck that is—right? The pandemic really forced me to reckon with my own access practices and pedagogy in the classroom, and with realizing that what I had been doing in the before-times wasn't as caring as I thought it was. And so I've had to really rethink access and care and need in the classroom, especially over the last year. I explore both of these things—the university's ableism and the transformation of my teaching during the pandemic—in the new book.

**Sandie Yi:** I was really thinking about the section's questions around "what did we learn from the pandemic?" and what not to forget. A part of me is like, whoa, it feels like a long time—I kind of forget what's happened already, and I think many of us have experienced this pandemic fog. Things have become really hard to capture at many, many levels. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was finishing my dissertation, and I started working for Access Living, an independent living center here in Chicago, as coordinator for their Arts and Culture program. We have a history in the Arts and Culture Program and also Bodies of Work, a network of disability art and culture, of featuring and promoting disabled artists' work. So, focusing on gathering support and finding professional training opportunities for artists with disabilities who mostly prioritize their identity as disabled artists. And my job coming in as a program coordinator also brings in my background as an arts therapist whose work focuses on community engagement.

And my practice was never really set in like a treatment setting. I think this was something that I found myself struggling with at the earlier stage of my own career. So when the pandemic hit, I remember having a conversation with Margaret Fink that asked "how do we build a community together?" And so we organized online workshops and tried to just bring

people together through various forms of art. During that time, I started running the Disability Culture Activism Lab for my art therapy students, as well, at the Art Institute of Chicago, where a lot of students came to the program wanting to help other disabled people. And there is a huge number of students who do come in with their own disabilities, but the larger field of art therapy doesn't really pay attention to that. So students come in bringing this passion to help people—"Yes, I want to help people who are going through struggles." But the professional expectation in any mental health field is about, well, you need to show that you can actually be the professional. And so there is oftentimes a line separating, well, you are either the client, or you are the expert who is the therapist. And so I do find that, wow, there's a line between showing up as who you are and wanting to be the professional.

So, how do you help people to be professional if they cannot embrace their connections to the disability community? I have students coming in with more awareness of "yes, I am someone with a disability," or "I don't know what it is that I have, but I'm definitely struggling with the system." At my lab, we pair people up in our community engagement events, and students work with participants. During the pandemic, oftentimes they are doing an online mental health check-in, where I would ask them to create portraiture of each other.

So overall, my practice is about being an agent connecting people, or connecting them to the other resources, and making our community bigger, or trying to discover how we can support one another. Knowing that as a professional mental health provider, you do not have to do every single thing, because, even as a disabled person, we don't know everyone's disability. And oftentimes people forget that, and are thinking that we have to do everything because we're the caregivers.

But I think care is definitely a—sometimes it's really sticky. And sometimes it's—sometimes it happens when we don't know it is happening, and therefore, we exhaust ourselves a lot from all these emotional labors and kind of like wear ourselves down.

**Aimi Hamraie:** I've been fortunate enough to be in disability culture and community for a while, and to be connected to other disabled people through organizing and other things. For me, part of participation in disability culture before the pandemic that was really normalized and important was the option to participate remotely or asynchronously. I think there are a lot of practices and technologies around that, especially in chronic illness and autistic communities.

In my teaching, I had been learning and watching and absorbing the way that, for disability studies scholars, it was expected and typical to have something like a livestream or a listserv or a web forum prior to the pandemic, and all of the ways that practice affected our

pedagogy as disability studies scholars. Quite a bit of my courses were already built out online and things like that for students who couldn't be there in person. For a long time, in my organizing work, I was observing how disability communities were responding to, for example, Occupy Wall Street—which was the first place I really think I was doing disability justice organizing with other people. There was a lot of discussion in our local Occupy chapter about how there wasn't a need to facilitate access because disabled people weren't present, and there were a group of disabled people that were like, "hey, here we are, and also there are more of us, and they are not present because they need to participate from home, and sometimes we do, as well." And so learning about different techniques of facilitating remote participation has been a really big part of disability culture and access for me. And in my scholarly work and in my design work, I've really been trying to identify the practices and values and techniques that underlie these types of cultural norms that we have. And I've been learning from the history of disability movements and communities, and also challenging our historical communities to do better and to embrace intersectionality and anti-capitalist approaches.

I think it's probably been six or seven years since I started the critical Design Lab, which is a group of disabled artists, researchers, and designers, and we address design from a disability culture perspective. And part of what we have learned through the work that we do is that access work isn't just about producing an accommodation. It's also something that's culturally productive and transformative. And it leaves evidence. For example, when we transcribe something, that leaves evidence: we can archive that. We develop different tools and techniques for producing access according to the kinds of spaces and opportunities that we're working within. I'm also a material culture historian, so I work a lot with the physical things and objects that disabled people have created and left behind and try to make sense of them, as part of history and as templates for media-making. Before the pandemic, in the Critical Design Lab, we always did our meetings remotely because we had members who were kind of scattered all over the world, in different time zones. We developed practices of media-making that were enabled by that kind of remote use of technology. We have a whole protocol for creating accessible podcasts, for example.

And then the pandemic started.

I kind of found myself in this weird space: I had just gotten tenure—literally the week before the lockdowns, or something like that. And I was put on all of these committees about campus reopening and stuff. At the same time, I was working with my colleagues in the Accessible Campus Action Alliance to actually promote hybrid and remote forms of university teaching and learning. This was pre-masks, pre-vaccines, and I was trying to give a justification or a set of rules for addressing accommodations around all of that. In the Critical Design Lab, we did a lot of pedagogical work and we have a post about accessible

pedagogy and remote pedagogy that I don't think I anticipated so many people would use, but it's been downloaded like 300,000 times or something like that.<sup>5</sup> And I hope it's been helpful for people who haven't had to think about that kind of thing before. We have the Remote Access dance party that some of the people here have been involved with. moira williams and Kevin Gotkin and I wrote about this in the special section to be published in Spring 2023, and Margaret Fink is in there, as well. And that's really an event where we try to use different technologies of access and hacking to see what else we can do—what other kinds of disability culture we can produce during the pandemic. Two other lab members Cassandra Hartblay and Jerah Moesch and I also curated an art exhibition that went up in Toronto after a year of COVID delays that also has this really cool virtual website that Cassandra and her research assistant created together, and Jerah did all of these amazing digital events as part of that. We had workshops for the artists and stuff. Through all of that, we got to experiment with things like, "what are the different possibilities once we accept that remote participation is okay and good and necessary?"

The last thing I'll talk about really briefly is that this is all feeding into a new project that we're doing now called the Remote Access Archive, where we're actually trying to document different ways that disabled people used remote participation before and during the pandemic, and we're finding all sorts of interesting stuff, and finding that it's really led by disabled cultural producers and artists. And they are really the technology makers in this situation, and there's a lot for us to learn from there. I'm excited to see how that all unfolds, as well. And thank you so much.

**Margaret Fink:** I was just fantasizing that I should start talking without unmuting, because it feels like that needs to happen at least one time in this conversation. But I'm excited to just be together today. This feels slightly experimental, in a lovely way, to do an introduction this way.

I was reflecting on my thought and practice and how it's been shaped in the pandemic moment. And I found myself really leaning on the before-times, because the kinds of questions and practices that I'm thinking about actively right now are all involved with what is it to build a Disability Cultural Center (DCC) at an institution of higher education. I was hired in August of 2019, so I was around for seven months or so before March 2020, when the pandemic hit.

I connected most to the question from the call for submissions that was about, you know, that inventiveness and resource-sharing that are crucial to our survival. That was absolutely a huge piece of the before-times for my colleagues and I, and it's a way that there is a sense of continuity from before the pandemic to now. Like I said, we were really just trying to figure out how do you hold space for disability culture—if we're talking about community, if we're talking about different disabled modes of operating, disabled modes of

valuing things, disabled modes of knowing that just come out of that magic that happens when disabled people get connected.<sup>6</sup> That's something that I think is touched on a few times in this special section.

The DCC is lucky to be part of a collective of seven cultural centers at UIC, University of Illinois Chicago called the Centers for Cultural Understanding and Social Change. So that offers us a lot of possibility models to gather pieces from as we do this work of building.<sup>7</sup> But I would say my intellectual life and the practices that we were working through was mostly a project of confronting how institutions of higher education are just—no surprise to anyone—super inaccessible, full of bumps and wrinkles for disabled people. So, I think this project continued during the pandemic, but I'm kind of thinking of the pre-pandemic moment as the beginning of this project. But I would say that my thinking and my practice has been part of a grand experiment in what we might call "interdependent cripistemology," which is kind of a mouthful.

I'm talking about the fact that I was dreaming and problem-solving and building alongside people, disabled people, who were working at the Disability Cultural Center. And I want to take a little bit of time to name them now. So I'm thinking of Lily-Diego Johnson. I'm thinking of Sylvie Rosenkalt—I'm getting emotional—Brian Heyburn, and Jordan Alcantar. So we've been having these really important conversations about how do we take up space in a university context? Mimi, I was not here when you came to speak at UIC, but your lecture had quite a ripple effect, quite an impact for giving people language to talk about unwellness and lack of care in the university setting. So we were just figuring out how to be a Center: how to be professional staff in a university where, you know, things like tabling, involvement fairs, was hugely inaccessible to a lot of us; trying to listen to people in a noisy room; relying on visual cues to figure out if somebody wants to talk to you or not; and so on and so forth.

We held each other in access intimacy when we were really exhausted with all of the access labor just to go to meetings, to show up for other communities on campus in solidarity.<sup>8</sup> And we also talked a lot about how do we navigate certain unspoken rules and norms about what counts as success, on the university level, and what you're allowed to say and what's not appropriate to say in certain university contexts. How do we operate from a place where we're like, "wow, ableism is pervasive, and a lot of people are really struggling?" And how do we hold our own success when we're aware that some of the rubrics for measuring success are not great for measuring our success, like attendance numbers? I mean, we did okay—we had some nice turnouts! But you know, attendance numbers. Trainings that are offered about, you know, how to be nice to disabled people, that kind of intervention. That's what we were thinking through.



But I think *our* ways of understanding our success and our value and our impact were around some of the crip experiments that we were doing with having events. You know, as Aimi mentioned, some of these practices were very much standard—or more usual, or more typical—in the disability spaces that some of us were just really lucky to have already experienced and bring to UIC and the university space here. We're super interested in and invigorated by talking about how our workplace was unfolding and how our relationships were working and how they weren't necessarily the standard, but they aligned with our values.

It was interesting to notice that a lot of people responded, a lot, to just having some kind of space that felt different from every other space that they were moving through at the university—the fact that we have lamp lighting in our lounge, the fact that we do an access invitation at the beginning of our events. We tell people, “please feel free to get up and move around.” All of these things felt like they shaped a different kind of space in a way that was impactful. To tie back to the question from the section, these were all instances where crip community was a space for survival in a larger environment that maybe didn't feel quite so nurturing. I've been thinking about that a lot in terms of vulnerability and even—it's a loaded term—*exposure*, to the experience of misfitting in the university.<sup>9</sup> So I would say when the pandemic hit, I agree with what has already been said, that there was a sense of phases. There was kind of an initial phase of, you know, we have resources. Like we shared out Aimi's guide for sure. We had already been Skyping people in, in the pre-pandemic times, to our discussion groups. This was something that we had tried before. There was less of that panic that Mimi brought up, that other people seemed to be experiencing. And we did just kind of let ourselves experiment, and play, and “let's just try these different things.” But as I'm reflecting now, we are in the late-stage pandemic, if we want to talk about it that way, where there is this pressure, this “return to normal” (big air quotes) happening.

It feels more like we are back in that position of needing to lean on one another, find these crip enclaves or coves that support our survival of exposure to these, you know, massive trends that I think Theodora was mentioning earlier: much more apparent eugenics (it's been there the whole time—it's not something that is in the past, absolutely not), and just disregard for disabled lives, all of those kinds of things.

To wrap up, basically, I've been noticing that when we're trying to assess the value of different kinds of work for the Disability Cultural Center, the pandemic has been a major push in the direction of knowing that it is very, very valuable to sit in what sustains you and your community. And we will hopefully find a really nice interface with some of the more legible forms of value on the level of the university, for our own continued existence as a center.

## Tapestries, Recipes, and Archives

**Alyson Patsavas:** “Crip Pandemic Life” takes up a key thread from disability justice writer, educator, and organizer Mia Mingus to assemble an archive of evidence and experience emergent from crip lives from the pandemic. As Mingus writes, “we must leave evidence, evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached.”<sup>10</sup>

And I think this need to gather, hold space for, and preserve evidence of all of the things that you have all talked about—our angers, our fears, our grief—for many of us have felt increasingly urgent during the pandemic.

In this spirit, “Crip Pandemic Life” offers a unique digital archive that brings together creative and scholarly reflections to document the experiences of folks during the pandemic. And as such, it includes multimedia projects, personal narratives, digital renditions of sculptures, masks, zines, and critical interrogations of the pandemic policies and politics.

You have all had a chance to look at some of the evidence that the collection in our special section offers and contribute to it as well, in some cases. What are some of the things that struck you? Were challenging? Apt? Lovely? Interesting? What do you want readers who are engaging with this collection to notice?

**Mimi Khúc:** This is Mimi. I’ll make an overall comment first. First of all, the collection is fucking amazing. The kind of breadth of what you’ve been able to capture is stunning.

And some of the through lines that I saw through it that I really enjoyed was first, seeing striving to survive what the pandemic has wrought. So, new forms of danger and new forms of abandonment, of structural abandonment. But then, in response to that—this is for me what was really breathtaking about the section—is seeing the different strivings to create care and connection through all of that. And how joyous it could be.

And I’m thinking here of Remote Access, the crip nightlife party that Aimi was a part of, with Kevin Gotkin and a bunch of other folks.<sup>11</sup> The creativity behind all of the different ways to explore and create access and care, in all of these different forms—all of these different virtual forms, and then also hybrid forms—and care for our bodies and our minds through all of that. Like, access doesn’t have to be the awful accommodations process, right, that we encounter in institutions. That is, the kind of bureaucratic drudgery that—everyone experiences it that way, even the people trying to get the accommodations, or maybe *especially* the people trying to get the accommodations.

What I saw here was the joy that’s possible in creating access together. By being creative, by leaning on each other, by being vulnerable together and trying new and weird shit. That

was amazing. That was so inspiring.

**Aimi Hamraie:** Aimi here. Yeah, I just want to echo Mimi in saying this is such an amazing collection of contributions, and essays, and creative work, and lots of experimental text formats. I really appreciated everything I read. And this makes sense because of the intention behind the call—like there's quite a bit about remote access in this special section. So I just kind of made some notes about a few of those that I think also capture some of the complexities and frictions around remote access, as well.

We know that, of course, many of the types of accommodations that were once made available for both disabled and non-disabled people at the start of the pandemic are now being taken away. And I think in this section we get some of the textures of why those forms of access are really important. There's quite a bit about the safety of home, for example, as an accessible space that's self-created. There are references to Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's idea of writing from bed, and a few different people kind of made references to that, for example in Sav Schaudleraff's creative piece or in Rebecca-Eli Long's piece about like the safety of knitting as a close, embodied practice. Like these kinds of things that we get to do as part of our spheres of participation when we're able to do that from home.

There's also this thread about webs of connection through the internet and other channels that I think has been talked about a lot in disability media studies for the last like twenty years, but there's a lot of really good primary source evidence of it here. Several different virtual worlds are mentioned: Animal Crossing, the Glitch Realm (which is part of the Remote Access parties), the virtual network Sick in Quarters which I hadn't heard about before but I was excited to learn about. And then I was also really interested in all of the different digital zines there were in here—thinking about zine-making that really started out as a very physical, material process of cutting and pasting and then what becomes possible when we make a zine digital or call something a zine, and what sorts of DIY communities, histories, and genealogies that connects us to. I think in a few different places there are also really interesting methodological notes about the norms of access that are emergent in different digital formats and spaces. So for example, the Restorying Autism Collective talked about applying principles of relaxed performance, which is for in-person performances, to a digital zine-making workshop. I thought that was really interesting.

There are also—there's a whole piece in there, a visual art piece, from Sam Fein about depicting people who are isolated and incarcerated and institutionalized, and that's the sort of other side of remote participation. It's that for people who have connections to histories of institutionalization, it can actually be really inaccessible or bring up a lot. And so I thought that was a really important reminder that we can't just valorize remoteness.

And I kind of came away from a lot of these just, I think, having like a more—kind of like a deepened closeness to the way that embodiment typically gets discussed in disability studies. And just kind of thinking about all of the different ways of being embodied, and how proximity and distance and mediation relate to all of that.

So thanks so much for sharing these pieces with us. I really enjoyed getting to take a look at them.

**Margaret Fink:** This is Margaret. I will chime in. I agree. I really appreciate the analysis that you both already shared. And I was finding myself drawn to two patterns which are part of an overall pattern. I thought there was a lot of texture, for lack of a better word, to the collection of the whole special section.

Aimi was saying that, yes, there were a lot of new forms of accessibility that became possible in lockdown but then, for some people, actually, the experience was quite different. There were new forms of inaccessibility and maybe having to confront trauma related to carceral situations that they had been in.

I wanted to just point out that there are a few really cool examples of situations where smallness and being local is important and crucial to the project. So I'm thinking of Sandie, you and Alison Kopit talked about the "Masks for Crips" project, and how keeping it pretty confined to Chicago was an important piece of how that work unfolded for you. And I'm thinking about my experience as a driver, like, that being the one situation where I would traverse long distances of space in a situation where I was otherwise in lockdown. But I really loved the way that you two pointed to that piece, the being local, being small, like the people that you actually know being the people that were being connected to the project.

And then the other example that I'm putting in a similar analytical relationship is the "Corona Look of the Day" that Bethany Stevens and Sarah Palmer shared.<sup>12</sup> And I was just impressed that they did it every day. I am not a person that can stick to those kinds of daily rhythms. But I thought having so many small instances ended up painting a really complex picture of, you know, this life that they wanted to leave evidence of.

So I just appreciated that a lot. I wanted to ask about the tapestry word in the title. Does that have a story? Because I kept thinking about it when I was reading the section.

**Theodora Danylevich:** Yeah, well, I—well, it was in one of the threads from *Open in Emergency*, Mimi's project, that I thought was so compelling. Because that was part of your project, too. Like having, trying to imagine how a digital archive can also be a tapestry. You know, obviously evocative of the AIDS quilt. You know, a concretization of how communities can hang together.

**Alyson Patsavas:** Yeah, I will just add that I also like thinking about it materially. Tapestry is sort of working with the materials that you have to build something that isn't encompassing, right?<sup>13</sup> The archive has its own sort of problematics of presenting something that's comprehensive, that is full, that is sort of speaking to like all of a set of experiences that, of course, that's not what this collection is or even can be.

There's lots of voices that by virtue of the sort of precarity of our lives are absent from the collection. And so I think this is more of a subsequent, post-decision reflection, but a kind of materiality there that the tapestry is what you built with what you have. And I think that's what this collection is in some ways. There's of course pieces missing and pieces that we can add on to to make other fabrics.

But of course I should give the space to Mimi to talk about the concept and the word, as well.

**Mimi Khúc:** This is Mimi. Thank you. I loved hearing about both of your theorizations of tapestry as a physical and textural way—the word texture has been coming up and I really, really love the word texture for this collection. Literally, because there are textures being depicted. But I also find the textural language floating through it quite a bit, too. So yeah tapestry as metaphor just feels like it is both capturing the kind of almost somatic nature of some of the section, but also, I like—Aly, you're saying—the kind of way that it is also, as an archive, temporal, and just you make it with what you have right then and there. But it can always grow. You can always keep adding to it.

So I like both of those elements of how you're thinking about tapestry here. Some of the textural language that I've noticed that I really, really loved, in—this is in Pau Abustan's piece on Animal Crossing. They use the language of gentleness and softness. And the comfy and cozy. I love the idea of comfy and cozy as an academic theoretical language, Right? "Gentle, soft, comfy, cozy." Like I love that that is a way you're talking about what access intimacy and care feels like on my body. And in my mind. And for my spirit.

**Sandie Yi:** This is Sandie speaking. I think speaking of being comfy and cozy, one thing that I thought about after skimming through the overall content for this collection, I was really thinking about, wow, this is an amazing collection of recipes. Because when I teach art therapy to my students, a lot of students are like, what materials do we use? How do we use them for, you know, treating specific communities or diagnoses? So it's really hard to tell students, well, there's no like one set of recipes. It's really all—it really all depends.

And the flavors I'm tasting from this collection is that, wow, there's something for the mind, something for the physical presence, something for the invisible connections that we get to have with our crip siblings. And the collection gave me a lot of ideas, like if—I mean,

hopefully God forbid—another pandemic or some sort of crisis happens, like I could see that this is something that we can go back to and see like “look at that, there were projects that people did in a small community where they practiced every day.” So there are a lot of survival skills that we can learn from. And so I feel like this is quite a toolkit for us to imagine things that maybe we don’t know what the future will bring to us.

But think about the collective wisdom and collective connection as, maybe how small or, at the time, how insignificant you feel: they are actually creating more footprints for us to perhaps follow, or perhaps to adapt. And also to have—to fulfill the desire that we have for each other. And I’m thinking about the desire as the nutrients. So what I want to say is the tapestry—I love the visual metaphor of the tapestry—and I would also like to add when I look at the collection, I feel like there’s a visceral fulfillment like oh I’m getting some nutrients to—for me to be restored. And things will happen. Crisis will happen again. And perhaps that I will be able to utilize them or practice some of them, whenever crisis comes.

**Theodora Danylevich:** That is such an amazing way to put it, and I just so appreciate that, Sandie, thank you.

**Alyson Patsavas:** This is Aly, I’m struck by the emotionality of hearing you all talk about the section and what gratitude I have to the contributors for giving us such rich material: the generosity with which folks submitted really beautiful, really personal, really intensive, really grief-filled material.

**Margaret Fink:** This is Margaret, I don’t want to speculate on behalf of the contributors, but I do think the leaving evidence piece animated a lot of the contributions. And I think I’m trying to approach a way to talk about how the work of documenting what happened is . . . important. I’ll just say that. I’m not sure how to talk about that yet. But I was reflecting a lot about how—I talked about just trying to lean into crip versions of value. Even though I’m very aware of the Disability Cultural Center’s context in the larger university that might measure success differently, and I was noticing that a lot of my sense of failure (but maybe that queer version of failure that I think the “Queer Out of Failure” piece brought to the surface) had to do with the ephemerality. The fact that we tried this and it was really neat and then it kind of went away and it lived on my phone and your phone. Or it lives kind of in the ether. Nobody recorded it. So I just—I do appreciate that level of the special section. And that level of the contributions. I mean, this is the whole point: leaving evidence. I’m just trying to take some time to slow down and notice how generative that is—or some other language. Maybe somebody else is thinking of a way to talk about it.

**Theodora Danylevich:** This is Theodora. As Sandie was talking, I don’t know if this is like a bad translation, but when you were saying recipes, I was thinking of like, okay, a care

recipe, is that like, you know, a prescription or medicine in a non-negative connotation type of way?

**Sandie Yi:** This is Sandie speaking. I was really thinking about how—yeah, I mean, one interpretation could be that, like, oh, yeah, we want to kind of go from the opposite of like purely medical model to “Hey, how about we twist the meanings of a recipe, a prescription, and add our flavors on disability culture?” But for me, when I referred to recipe, I was really thinking about how, you know, “this is my grandma’s recipe.” And I don’t have the same ingredients from her generation, or the technique. But I’m going to adapt something that I have. And I feel like because of disability—it doesn’t really only happen within the family. Our disability culture, as a family, it’s so big. And most of us weren’t taught that “this is your crip family.” And so I like to think that we are creating a family together. And there could be our family recipes. And this recipe will be—will have all sorts of flavors and practices.

You know, we can have our cousin’s recipe focusing on autistic experience, or another tribe’s disability recipe for us to really piece out the flavors, based on how you see yourself: the space in which how you see yourself—in your crip bodymind—fit. And also we can model after each other. It’s like, oh, yeah, when I think about how I am going to dress, I may get some ideas from an article. That’s just one other example.

**Mimi Khúc:** This is Mimi. I want to actually run with both of your metaphors of recipe a little bit—just something sparked for me. Thinking about, okay, if this is a recipe or a prescription or some kind of resource for thinking about how to move in the world, how to survive, how to create care, I love that there is deep grief in the section. Because for me, it makes so much sense that care and survival involve feeling and expressing that grief as fully as possible. I’m thinking of the poem “August 2020” by Jennifer Scuro. I was really struck by that poem, in its smallness. Like it’s describing a very small moment, quiet moment, that is devastating, right? And that for me, that affective place or register makes a lot of sense for what unwellness and pain has looked like. And the necessity of sitting with that and witnessing that. And feeling that. And not pretending that it’s not there or that everything is going to be okay. So I love that that can be—we can think of that, too, as a process of care, as well. Or as a model for care.

**Aimi Hamraie:** This is Aimi. As I’ve been listening to you all talk about recipes, I’ve just been thinking so much about the form of this. I don’t know if you’re calling it an section or an archive or maybe tapestry is the right word. And the now kind of evolving practice of creating these not typical academic texts and things related. And also thinking about Mimi’s *Open in Emergency* and the practice of giving someone a box that is full of care and knowledge and history and all of these things. And so I wonder if maybe we could talk about form and design a little bit, too. One of the things I’m wondering—because I’m always talking about disability studies to people who are in fields where the form of knowledge

production is usually purely textual—we are maybe a little bit diagrammatic or visual. And, in some way, is there a disability studies norm that is emerging in which our academic contributions also necessarily take on these many different forms and embody practices of care? Is that something that we could pinpoint and say “it’s part of what it means to do disability studies”? So if someone is evaluating the work, let’s say for a tenure file or something like that, that could be a metric for saying yes, this belongs there with all of this other stuff. Or maybe even not that form of evaluation.

**Mimi Khúc:** This is Mimi. Aimi, I love that so much, thinking about form. And I love your framing of like “Is this a disability studies, disability community necessity?” To have a more capacious understanding of “What does it mean to do those kinds of works on the ground in the community?” And like I think about—you brought up tenure—boo, tenure—you brought up tenure and evaluation. It makes me think there are disability studies books and articles that are super smart and investigate all kinds of things in disability theory, history, and community, but they don’t enact care themselves.

And that’s a question I’ve been thinking a lot about. How are the things we create, even at the level of the academy, not just studied care as object, right, but think about the form so that we’re actually practicing the things that we’re trying to study, as well. That the form can reflect or can enact those commitments, as well.

**Alyson Patsavas:** This is Aly. I just want to say that I hope this is the world we’re entering. And I feel like so much of disability studies work is about this dreaming and imagining and sort of declaring a future that we want, as we’re building it and as we’re demanding it. And so I love this—and thank you so much for bringing that into the space as we think about how to intentionally name this as part of the project of disability studies work, and certainly this collection has been modeled from folks who have done this very similar work, putting poetry and art practice together.<sup>14</sup> Those of you on this call are here precisely for leading the way to this kind of—for this kind of work.

Yes and thank you.

And more, please.

**Margaret Fink:** This is Margaret. I’m thinking about this question of form, and the idea that I think is kind of coming to me out of the submissions to the special section is that there are forms of knowledge that aren’t really commensurate with a sentence that says words. I think a lot of what I have thought about, in the now distant past when I was thinking about image and text, is really interested in that question of “what can different media say that other media cannot really express?”



So I think what we're talking about is actually that we would as a discipline need to accept other forms of knowledge-making in order to support that insight, which I think is present in some of the work that's been coming out of the field—and definitely out of this collection. We do need to proliferate the ways that we share understanding. There's even, I think, people who talk about different forms of thought, like constative thought, where it's like, you make a statement. It is true. And then there's other versions of even knowing.

So I'm excited about some of those questions, and what kinds of form would support even sharing thought that isn't sayable.<sup>15</sup>

**Mimi Khúc:** This is Mimi, I just want to offer a phrase that I have found really meaningful for — as a possible way of approaching some of the things we're talking about. This is from a dear friend and colleague, Jim Lee. And he writes in his new book *Pedagogies of Woundedness* that rigor must be tender. Right? We idealize and value rigor so much in academia. What does it mean to inject tenderness in there? Or use tenderness as a frame for it? Or have tenderness as the goal of that rigorous work? And for me that leads us to possibilities of care in, through our work. Rigor is tender.

**Alyson Patsavas:** I can think of no better way to end this conversation than that. But thank you, everyone, for your thoughtful and really generous insights on the section's themes and content of the collection. As a way of wrapping up I was hoping we could collectively invite folks to linger on, meander through, grieve alongside and find solace within the words, images, and theorizing within the "Crip Pandemic Life" collection. Thank you to the access workers who made today possible.

## Glossary

By Corbin Outlaw, with Theodora Danylevich, Margaret Fink, and Alyson Patsavas.

Contributions authored by participants Aimi Hamraie and Mimi Khúc where indicated.

The format of the introductory roundtable lends itself to gestures and references that some readers might want more context for (or definitions of). In order to retain the conversational nature of the discussion, provide a quick reference guide, and make apparent the layers of editing that happen across the time and space of writing, we've decided to include these additions in a glossary format here. Time stamps appear in parentheses directly following keywords. These indicate where to find the word in the video conversation. In some cases, contributor names appear in parentheses after a glossary entry; this indicates that they wrote that entry.

## Access intimacy

See 35:48 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=2148>> and 59:00 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=3000>> . Access intimacy is a form of intimacy that centers and valorizes access needs. Mia Mingus, in coining the concept, describes it as the “elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.”<sup>16</sup> This intimacy is not always intentional, nor does it have to involve explicit and active engagement with access work. It is not dependent on disability identity, but is built on an understanding of and commitment to access needs. Access intimacy deepens our connections with others, cultivated through anticipating one’s access needs or navigating through the processes to obtain access; it is “a tool for liberation.”<sup>17</sup>

## Access labor

See 35:53 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=2153>> . Access labor is the work performed in addressing sensory, physical, mental, or cognitive barriers to participation or engagement. This work has always been a part of disability kinship and organizing. Naming this work “access labor” acknowledges the time, energy, and skill sets that such tasks require.

## Before-times

See 15:16 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=916>> and 31:29 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=1889>> . Before-times is a colloquial word describing the pre-pandemic period. The term calls attention to how dominant mindsets, actions, institutions, and institutional practices have radically changed following the pandemic. This term also reflects the ongoing nature of these changes and the pandemic itself.

## Bodymind

See 1:08:36 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=4118>> . Bodymind is a word used to describe the mind and body as intertwined. The term “bodymind” rejects a view of mental and physical processes as separate and, rather, draws attention to how they affect and even give rise to one another.<sup>18</sup> Disability studies theorizing of the bodymind views physical, mental, and sensory experiences as synergistic and inextricable. The term has also permeated into activist, communal, and individual spaces and contexts.

## Collective care

See 1:22 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=82>> and 42:35 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=2555>> . Collective care is care that is practiced horizontally, among community members, encompassing practices of interdependence, mutual aid, crip inventiveness, and resource sharing. It can exist on small or larger scales, takes work, and can both deepen relationships and cement community.<sup>19</sup> It is a practice not unique to disability communities, but one that is often central to them.

## Constative thought

See 1:17:04 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=4624>> . Constative thought is a thought made up of a straightforward descriptive statement about the world. In context here, it's opposed to wilder, less summarizable forms of sense-making associated with leaving evidence and disability dreaming.

## Crip

Crip is a term that emerges from disability activists, cultural, and community spaces to denote a particular approach to and/or understanding of disability, chronic illness, and non-normative bodymind experiences.<sup>20</sup> Crip is sometimes referred to as the radical edge or contestatory contingent of disability community and cultural spaces. Crip is not a static term, but rather "an invitation to community, one that's built around questioning ableist norms, sharing our lived experiences, and solidarity."<sup>21</sup> A reclamation of the derogatory "cripple," crip also sits in a lineage with feminist and queer theory and intersectional analytics, denoting a particular positionality in relation to power.

## Crip knowledge

See 6:43 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=403>> . Crip knowledge refers to the insights, ingenuity, and wisdom cultivated from lived experiences of disability and chronic illness. These insights emerge from and leverage a recognition of the historical and structural barriers that shape disability and illness experiences and are often cultivated in the service of surviving (and thriving through) these barriers.

## Crip spacetime

See 7:26 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=447>> . Crip spacetime reflects the ways time and space are influenced by the lived experiences of disability and chronic illness, which can frequently be at odds with normative expectations

of one's relationship to space and time. Margaret Price notes: "I define 'crip spacetime' as a material-discursive reality experienced by disabled people, one which is difficult or even impossible to perceive by those not experiencing it."<sup>22</sup> In relation to the pandemic, the disjuncture that many immunocompromised and/or high risk people felt when witnessing celebrations of a "return to normal" while still living in pandemic-heightened precarious conditions can and has been understood as living in/with crip spacetime.

### Cripistemologies of crisis

See 6:57 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=417>> .

Cripistemologies of crisis are forms of knowledge production that turn to critical disability and chronic illness wisdom as tools to address the conditions enacted by crisis temporalities. Both troubling the notion of "crisis" and acutely aware of its enabling force, cripistemologies of crisis mine the lived experiences for the tools of comfort, survival, and critique used to navigate crisis as a way of life. In doing so, they add a layer to the existing notion of (and ongoing project of) cripistemologies.<sup>23</sup>

### Dreaming/imagining disability futures

See 2:48 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=168>> ; 5:57 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=357>> . Dreaming/imagining disability futures describes the practice and call to action for liberatory change, hope from a crip perspective. Against a cultural and historical backdrop that often denies (both in imagination and in material ways) disabled and chronically-ill people's futures, disabled activists, theorists, artists, and culture workers have taken up the project of imagining the future in new ways, ways that center disability and chronic illness experiences.<sup>24</sup>

### Interdependent cripistemologies

See 34:09 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=2049>> .

Interdependent cripistemologies is a description of crip knowledges that explicitly names the collective nature of knowledge production. Interdependent cripistemologies also draw out crip forms of knowledge that surround and enable care and mutual need.

### Material culture

See 26:26 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=1586>> .

Material culture is a term from the field of history that describes the tools, crafts, physical

objects, buildings, textiles, and other elements at the center of human interaction. (Aimi Hamraie)

### Necropolitics

See 5:25 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=325>> .

Necropolitics refers to the formations that target, prioritize, and manage the death of devalued lives. Scholars who have since engaged with necropolitical theorizing focus on the racial, colonial, and ableist motives of these political formations.<sup>25</sup> During the ongoing pandemic, the de-prioritizing of intellectually disabled COVID patients for the limited resources of ventilators was a targeted form of necropolitics. Even after the outcry and pushback from disability activists and allies, systems quietly continued to obtain coerced or even forged “Do Not Intubate” medical orders from intellectually disabled people—even when the hospitals were not facing shortages, reflecting both explicit and implicit forms of necropolitics.<sup>26</sup>

### Pedagogy of unwellness

See 12:24 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=744>> . A

pedagogy of unwellness is the recognition that we are all differentially unwell, meaning we are all unwell in different ways at different times in relation to differentially disabling and enabling structures. This means we need and deserve differential care at all times. (Mimi Khúc)

### Precarity

See 8:06 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=486>> and

56:37 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=3397>> . Precarity is a state of existence marked by uncertainty and insecurity, often the result of structural divestment or abandonment. For example, unstable access to housing, care, community, (capital) employment, medical intervention can result in precarity or preciousness.

### Relaxed performance

See 50:31 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=3031>> .

Relaxed performance describes a dedicated performance that creates a more flexible, comfortable, or relaxed environment for audience members. Some aspects of a relaxed performance might include (but not limited to) house lights remaining partially lit, lowered volume of any sound, and invitations for the audience to move about the space freely.

## Technologies of access

See 28:49 < <https://archive.org/details/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable?start=1729>> .

Technologies of access is inclusive of but expansive beyond the concept of “assistive technology,” the term “technologies of access” describes the tools, negotiations, and relations that facilitate accessibility, whether on an individual or collective basis. Examples of the technologies of access include access riders, access information for events, access worker coordination, mutual aid networks, image descriptions, breaks, and plain language. (Aimi Hamraie)

## Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful to the University of Illinois Chicago’s Institute for the Humanities, whose [Humanities Innovation Grants](https://huminst.uic.edu/research-support/current-competitions/humanities-innovation/) < <https://huminst.uic.edu/research-support/current-competitions/humanities-innovation/>> made this conversation possible.

## Notes

1. At the time of the recording, we had not yet split the collection to span two issues of *Lateral*. ↩
2. Also on the call today we have Corbin Outlaw who is lending their logistical support as a graduate assistant on the project, and our interpreters Faith and Michelle, and our captioner Cindy. ↩
3. Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas, “Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present,” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.7> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.7>> . ↩
4. “I just signed the contract—woohoo! —” Mimi Khúc ↩
5. <https://www.mapping-access.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/accessible-teaching-in-the-time-of-covid-19> < [https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\\_\\_www.mapping-2Daccess.com\\_blog-2D1\\_2020\\_3\\_10\\_accessible-2Dteaching-2Din-2Dthe-2Dtime-2Dof-2Dcovid-2D19&d=DwMFaQ&c=slrrB7dE8n7gBJbeO0g-IQ&r=vCFp9YdKFpdrtw11Nxd7TA&m=OEDzjwsu4ovQhAUoZOkGzm6wN26E1HeqQZZbq881aF0whGqFN7gEu8y6xsYtE1bl&s=BF9UKikxrPN-jynuoetbRA9Jpw7rOA6r7pxioEST7HY&e=>](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.mapping-2Daccess.com_blog-2D1_2020_3_10_accessible-2Dteaching-2Din-2Dthe-2Dtime-2Dof-2Dcovid-2D19&d=DwMFaQ&c=slrrB7dE8n7gBJbeO0g-IQ&r=vCFp9YdKFpdrtw11Nxd7TA&m=OEDzjwsu4ovQhAUoZOkGzm6wN26E1HeqQZZbq881aF0whGqFN7gEu8y6xsYtE1bl&s=BF9UKikxrPN-jynuoetbRA9Jpw7rOA6r7pxioEST7HY&e=>) . ↩
6. Aimi Hamraie and the Critical Design Lab have been exploring magic as a paradigm for describing disability culture modes, but this turn of phrase comes from a mural by Shannon Finnegan that says “In service of the alchemy that happens when disabled people are connected.” Shannon Finnegan, *Portable Mural 2, Shannon Finnegan: Lone Proponent of Wall-to-Wall Carpet* (February 9–August 23, 2020, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, ON), exhibition, <https://cuag.ca/exhibition/shannon-finnegan-lone-proponent-of-wall-to-wall-carpet/> < <https://cuag.ca/exhibition/shannon-finnegan-lone-proponent-of-wall-to-wall-carpet/>> . ↩
7. Trans activist and actor Laverne Cox offers the term *possibility model* as an alternative to role model in a 2014 interview with Katie Couric. In the same interview, Couric asked a harmful question about anatomy, which was soundly critiqued by trans activists and allies. The video is no longer available, but the transcript has been saved by is available at the now inactive online feminist community *Feministing*. Content note for transmisogyny. Maya Dusenbury, “Watch Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera School Katie Couric on the Preoccupation with Trans Bodies,” *Feministing*, January 7, 2014, <http://feministing.com/2014/01/07/watch-laverne-cox-and-carmen-carrera-school-katie-couric-on-the-preoccupation-with-trans-bodies/>. ↩

8. For "[access intimacy](https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/)," see Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice" *Leaving Evidence* (blog), remarks for Paul K. Longmore Lecture on Disability Studies, April 11, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> > . Louise Hickman is a scholar of [access labor](https://www.louisehickman.com/). Louise Hickman, "Automation of Access: disability, feminist and technology," *Lousehickman.com*, accessed on November 10, 2022, <https://www.louisehickman.com/> < <https://www.louisehickman.com/> > . See Annika Konrad's theorization of *access fatigue* for more about access labor as it's raised here. Annika Konrad, "Access Fatigue: The Rhetorical Work of Disability in Everyday Life," *College English* 83, no. 3 (January 2021): 179–198, <https://library.ncte.org/journals/ce/issues/v83-3/31093> < <https://library.ncte.org/journals/ce/issues/v83-3/31093> > . ↵
9. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2011): 591–609, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016570> < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016570> > . ↵
10. Mia Mingus, *Leaving Evidence*, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/> > . ↵
11. A piece about Remote Access will appear in *Lateral's* Spring 2023 issue. ↵
12. This piece by Stevens and Palmer will appear in *Lateral's* Spring 2023 issue. ↵
13. In re-reading the transcript < <https://ia601505.us.archive.org/21/items/crip-pandemic-life-roundtable/Crip%20Pandemic%20Life%20Roundtable%20%28transcript%29.pdf> >, it is clear that I (Aly) am a bit confused about the differences between a tapestry and a quilt, and am perhaps drawing from Theodora's previous comment about the AIDS quilt. A tapestry does weave textures, colors, and images together, but the theorization that unfolds here more accurately describes a quilt. Yet, everyone just sort of rolls with this elision or mistake in a way that I am both grateful for and reminded of the fact that (though this hardly qualifies) some of the best moments of [crip](https://cripcommunity.org/) community, playfulness, and theorizing can come from mishearing, misunderstanding, misfitting, and even misplaced metaphors. As such, we are leaving this awkward, confused metaphorization as is, and invite the neologism "quilttapestry" to the [crip](https://cripcommunity.org/) table. ↵
14. Just a few models of this type of multi-form collections that have been particularly influential for us include Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman, eds., "Crip Temporalities," special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021), <https://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/issue/120/2> < <https://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/issue/120/2> > ; Alice Wong, *Disability Visibility Project*, accessed Nov 10, 2022, <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/> < <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/> > ; Lydia Brown, E. Ashkenazy, and Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, *All the Weight of our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism* (London: DragonBee Press, 2017); Eva Eggermann, ed., *Crip Magazine*, 5th ed., 2022. ↵
15. This comment attempts to remember a distinction I (Margaret) read about long ago. The constative is most famously opposed to the performative. For Sedgwick, in *Touching Feeling*, the "merely 'constative' or descriptive" is opposed to the "'queer' potential of the performative" and the kinds of sense-making found in affect, texture, and qualities of "powerful writing" that reside in "quite varied, often apparently keenly pleasure-oriented, smaller-scale writerly and intellectual solicitations." Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3, 144. ↵
16. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: the Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), May 5, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> > . ↵
17. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↵
18. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 269. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127>; see also Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Sara Acevedo uses the term *embodiments*. Sara M. Acevedo Espinal, "'Effective Schooling' in the Age of Capital: Critical Insights from Advocacy Anthropology, Anthropology of Education, and Critical

- Disability Studies," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 9, no. 5 (December 20, 2020): 265–301, <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i5.698> < <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i5.698>> . ↵
19. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), 85–105. ↵
20. This term does not have a timestamp because it is infused throughout the conversation, but we felt providing a definition useful here, particularly as a means to highlight the term's activist and community origins and grounding. ↵
21. This articulation comes from Margaret Fink and the UIC Disability Cultural Center's explainer for a discussion series called Crip Coffee Break, and takes a cue from Eli Clare, who writes that *crip* and *queer* are "words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics." Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (1999; reis., Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpk2c.12> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpk2c.12>> . ↵
22. Margaret Price, *Crip Spacetime* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming), 2; see also Margaret Price "Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (April 2021): 257–277, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966>> . ↵
23. Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, "Cripistemologies: Introduction," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 127–148, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12> < <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12>> . ↵
24. See Alison Kafer's discussion of "imagined futures" in Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 2013), 1–24; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*. The Ford Foundation also has a Disabled Futures fellowship program. "Disabled Futures Fellows," *Ford Foundation*, accessed Nov. 13, 2022, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/investing-in-individuals/disability-futures-fellows/> < <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/investing-in-individuals/disability-futures-fellows/>> . ↵
25. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). ↵
26. Joseph Shapiro, "One Man's COVID-19 Death Raises the Worst Fears of Many People with Disabilities," *National Public Radio*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/31/896882268/one-mans-covid-19-death-raises-the-worst-fears-of-many-people-with-disabilities> < <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/31/896882268/one-mans-covid-19-death-raises-the-worst-fears-of-many-people-with-disabilities>> . ↵
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## Author Information

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### Article details

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## Surviving and Thriving: Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa Dream Worlds in *Animal Crossing New Horizons*

by Pau Abustan | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** As a queer, crip, genderfluid, and diasporic Pilipinx scholar-activist-educator, my ancestors, communities, and I live at the intersections of multiple sites of oppression and resistance. As someone who is sick, disabled, and neurodivergent, I experienced anxiety, depression, and chronic bodymind pain before the pandemic and even more during the pandemic. Nintendo Switch's *Animal Crossing New Horizons* (ACNH) video game kept me afloat during uncertain times. ACNH opened up a whole new alternative universe for me to live in. I meditated more when escaping to my scenic and calming virtual island. I relaxed more when fishing, catching butterflies, and hearing the tranquil ocean waves crash within the game. Building my dream world within my ACNH virtual game contributed to me surviving and fostering deeper friendships with fellow sick, disabled, neurodivergent, queer, transgender, Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color (BIPOC) friends. ACNH became a safe way for us to socialize and it continues to be a source of joy for many of us. I highlight how my experiences with ACNH allowed me to cultivate queer, crip, and decolonial Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds where all beings including people, animals, land, water, and air thrive together.

**KEYWORDS** queer, crip, youth, storytelling, popular culture, Pilipinx

## Introduction

My queer, crip, and genderfluid Pilipinx ancestors dreamed of a world where our intertwined communities and I can expand into the endless possibilities of our authentic selves, communities, and worlds of rest, joy, and connection. My ancestors and I are queer, crip, and genderfluid as we actively resist constructed and imposed scripts for living placed on us by society. In this essay, I share how I and many queer, transgender, genderfluid, neurodivergent, chronically ill, disabled BIPOC struggled to survive before the pandemic and during the pandemic. Nintendo Switch's *Animal Crossing New Horizons* became a venue for me and my multiply marginalized friends to connect and find routine gentleness

and softness within the game when doing our best to survive in a society that continues to disregard multiply marginalized people. As our chronic pain, depression, illnesses, and anxieties intensified, we built comfy and cozy community together in and out of *ACNH* with our friendships centering consent and social distancing. We engaged in playful and diverse queer and crip neurodivergent communication defying constructed and imposed expectations for compulsory communication. We reveled in queer and crip friendships which defied constructed norms for in-person-only friendships in and out of the game. We met each other's access needs in the ways we could. Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds were built when we practiced the decolonial Pilipinx Kapwa "Self in the Other" praxis where we rooted ourselves in interdependent connection with all beings on earth in a sustainable manner in and out of the game.<sup>1</sup> We dreamed of Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa worlds where all have access to interdependent and sustainable self and community care.

## Ancestors, Community, and Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa

### Background

*Content note: colonial violence and multiple systemic oppressions*

Why is the comfy and cozy community found within *ACNH* critical for multiply marginalized people? I will discuss how my sick, disabled, neurodivergent, queer, transgender, genderfluid, and femme Pilipinx ancestors and communities survived and continue to survive multiple forms of colonial and systemic violence. Cultivating alternative dream worlds of possibility-making and relaxing into our fullest and most authentic selves in Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice interdependent community is what my ancestors dreamed of.

Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa centers how my ancestors and communities continue to resist and dream of alternative worlds where all beings thrive and are fully valued, loved, and taken care of, because as colonized peoples, we do not always have access to dignity and respect. During the late 1800s in the Philippines, my great-grandfather's family actively protested and resisted Spanish and U.S. colonial violence and thus my mother's clan was eliminated. My great-grandfather was one of two brothers who survived and who were taken in, hidden, and adopted by another family. My great-grandfather was separated from his brother and told to never to share who he really was and where he came from in order to protect himself. This story of my great-grandparent is one of many rarely written stories of resistance to racist and ableist colonization as colonizers do not consider BIPOC to be intelligent, capable, and worthy of living.

My father's parents, my grandparents, who raised me and my siblings, survived WWII in the Philippines. Their Lucban village was burned down by Japan's imperial soldiers, and they were forced to hide and live in the forest. My grandma gave birth to my uncle in the forest without a medical doctor and without medical care. In order to survive and with false promises of a path to U.S. citizenship, my grandfather fought alongside U.S. soldiers. What my grandparents went through is one of a multitude of rarely documented stories of BIPOC who continue to resist state-sanctioned imperialist violence.

Growing up in the Philippines, my parents experienced ongoing colonization and imperialist U.S. military occupation of the Philippines along with the dictatorship of the Marcos regime. The Philippines and its more than 182 Indigenous tribes continue to experience systemic poverty and destruction of Indigenous peoples' bodyminds, waters, air, and lands due to colonization, imperial wars, and neoliberal profit-over-people mentalities and actions found throughout education, healthcare, leadership, and work systems. My parents thus immigrated to the United States searching for dreams of freedom and a better life, yet only to be met with broken dreams of systemic discrimination, hostility, poverty, and anti-Asian violence. The stories of my immigrant parents are one of the many rarely widely-shared stories of Asian immigrants within the US.

Fast forward to today, I am a freshly minted Ph.D. and higher education Queer Crip Pilipinx scholar-activist-educator. It was not an easy journey for me to survive yesterday, survive today, and survive tomorrow. It was difficult for me to graduate with my doctorate degree as a queer, genderfluid, neurodivergent, and chronically ill disabled person of color as I am not supposed to be here today living my fullest and authentic self with interconnected communities who are naming and challenging multiple interconnected systems of oppression. Our collective communities are not supposed to be here today. Yet, we, as a collective of survivors and dreamers, are resisting, surviving, and thriving.

As a scholar-activist-educator, I practice Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa of interdependent and sustainable communities fostered within my teaching and activism because the systems I navigate and survive everyday were never meant for me and my multiple interconnected communities as they were built to erase and minimize us. I align Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa with the tenets of Indigenous land- and culture-back decolonization as interdependent and sustainable communities challenge the built-in and ongoing systems and structures of colonization found throughout every aspect of our society as shared by Indigenous scholar, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui.<sup>2</sup> Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dreams the disability justice tenet of interdependence brought forth by Patty Berne, Aurora Levins Morales, and Sins Invalid (2018) into fruition as all beings are interconnected and need each other to survive.<sup>3</sup> Following the wisdom and leadership of Indigenous and two-spirit scholars such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa honors how the liberation of all people

is bound with the liberation of BIPOC peoples, water, air, and land.<sup>4</sup> As Black feminists Aph Ko and Syl Ko share, the freedom of all beings is needed including honoring the freedom of BIPOC peoples and animals as interconnected.<sup>5</sup> Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa is decolonial, queer, and crip, as it resists constructions of who is worthy of life, dignity, and respect as all of us, especially those multiply marginalized and impacted directly by systems of oppression, deserve access to quality and sustainable care, community, rest, and joy.

### Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa and Youth Learning through Youth Popular Culture Animated Storytelling

Youth learning and youth popular culture are spaces where Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds are needed and, simultaneously, where they manifest. As children, my siblings and I were inevitably exposed to historical and systemic anti-Asian violence when learning of and witnessing Pilipinx ongoing histories of oppression and resistance. My family grew up in a low-income, majority BIPOC, and highly policed neighborhood where BIPOC were criminalized and pitted against each other. Our house was robbed, trashed, and vandalized multiple times. Anti-Asian slurs were yelled at us at our school and neighborhood. My siblings and I knew what systemic racism, classism, and ableism were and we knew the divisions constructed between our interconnected communities as we experienced them, lived them, and felt them before we learned textbook definitions of systemic interconnected oppressions. My mom, who worked two low-wage jobs, shared with me how her supervisor and coworkers treated her as less intelligent, less capable, and less worthy. My dad worked multiple low-wage jobs and struggled to maintain employment before becoming disabled. The racism and ableism my family and I experienced during my youth was not an individual occurrence; it was systemic—built into the fabrics of our societal systems.

It was not until college that I learned I come from a lineage of Pilipinx people in which women, transgender, genderfluid, and queer people led communities who actively resisted colonization and who continue to resist colonization, imperialism, and neoliberalism today.<sup>6</sup> It was not until later during college, at student of color conferences, when I learned how violence and trauma from historical and ongoing oppressions lead to the physical, health, and mental health illnesses and disabilities found within myself, my family, and greater diasporic Pilipinx communities today.<sup>7</sup> Settler colonization brought forth systemic cis-hetero-sexist-racist-ableism that me, my family, my ancestors, and my interconnected communities continue to resist.

My writing, research, and activism showcase how youth learning and youth popular culture spaces can serve as venues where we refuse oppressions placed upon our multiple communities and where we dream decolonial, queer, crip, and disability justice worlds of

infinite possibilities. What if youth learned about the fullness and richness of our distinct, yet shared, histories of collective resistance? What if youth learned directly from the dreams and wisdom of sick, disabled, neurodivergent, queer, nonbinary, and transgender BIPOC communities? What if every single being on earth including our animal, water, air, land, earth, and plant siblings had access to abundant care, rest, joy, dignity, respect, and community?

## Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa through *ACNH*

As I struggled to survive before the pandemic and during the pandemic, I found the youth learning and youth popular culture world of *ACNH* to be a place where I found myself resisting multiple oppressions and dreaming themes of a world my ancestors and communities long for: a world of routine gentleness and softness; a world of comfy and cozy community; a world of queer and crip friendships; a world of playfulness of communication; a world of interdependent and interconnected relaxation. These themes found within *ACNH* showcase Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa worlds where we thrive in decolonial, queer, crip, and disability justice interdependent connection and sustainable community.

### Routine Gentleness and Softness



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Image-1-Pau-Abustan.jpg>

Figure 1. Screenshot from *ACNH*.



The cis-hetero-sexist-racist-ableist world settler colonization brought forward is neoliberal as it prioritizes profit over people, individual achievement, private wealth accumulation, and disconnection over community wealth and relationship-building to transform systems. Before the pandemic and especially during the start of the pandemic, I experienced major depression, anxiety, PTSD, and OCD which aggravated my autoimmune illness, chronic bodymind pain, and other health disabilities. It was a struggle to get out of bed, remember to take medications, connect, and maintain spoons to feel hopeful enough to get through the day to tomorrow. I felt overwhelming sorrow and despair, and I was disconnected from myself and from those around me.

Fortunately, a loved one shared *ACNH* with me. During this difficult time, *ACNH* allowed me to experience the bountiful possibilities of Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds of interdependent and sustainable community found within the youth learning and youth popular culture animated storytelling realm of *ACNH*. At this very moment, time, and place, *ACNH* was the joy and playfulness in community connection I was yearning for. I thrived in the routine softness and gentleness found with animal *ACNH* friends within the game and with friends in real life playing the game. Routine softness and gentleness aligns with Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds of interdependent and sustainable community as it is the settling in and expanding into co-created routines which invite ease into our lives as we share our authentic selves in relation with others. *ACNH* became an alternative universe for me and many chronically ill, neurodivergent, depressed, anxious, and disabled friends to connect in virtual and real worlds of interdependence and sustainable community care during a time of increasing disconnection and despair.

Routine gentleness and softness within *ACNH* includes animal *ACNH* friends checking in with us every day. They share, "What's up? I miss you. Have you eaten a good meal lately? What are your favorite foods? What are your favorite hobbies? Do you like green, oolong, or black tea?" Checking in and showing up for each other in the ways we can is a way we can cultivate queer and crip sustainable worlds which refuse society's individual productivity mandates which lead to disconnection and isolation. Friend check-ins during turbulent times mean everything, especially when they are check-ins from adorable frog, deer, and elephant *ACNH* friends. In addition to animal *ACNH* friends, my friends in real life checked in on me and asked, "How are you feeling? Need anything today? Want to visit my island today? Need any fruits, bells, and other items?" Friends in real life checking in on each other and asking if we need anything in real life and in the game is queer and crip resistance as our world encourages individualism and isolation over community connection and collective care. My animal *ACNH* friends, friends in real life, and I cultivated routine gentleness and softness with each other, encouraging each other to eat, drink water, enjoy tea and coffee, rest, and play during a time of growing uncertainties. We swapped homemade banana bread, honey cake, chocolate chip cookies, brownies, sourdough

bread, fruit tarts, apple crisps, Hawaiian chocolates, and more both in real life and within the game.

Routine softness and gentleness in the game includes animal *ACNH* friends sharing their love for fishing, catching bugs and butterflies, museum-going, boat-riding, digging for treasures on the beach, and visiting local shops. They expressed excitement over sharing space with other animal *ACNH* friends and friends in real life visiting within the game. This routine gentleness and softness of everyday joyful connections and community experiences disappeared during the pandemic. It became even more stressful to visit beaches, museums, and local shops. Enjoying slices of life experiences within the game during a time when our everyday routines halted was life-giving and a breath of fresh air.

Routine gentleness and softness found within *ACNH* supported my chronically ill, neurodivergent, and disabled self as I was able to have more routine and structure in my life through the game. As a neurodivergent person, I depend upon routines which assist me in surviving and thriving every day. Since the pandemic disrupted my daily routines, it was refreshing to find routine expectations and structures of gentleness and softness within *ACNH*. I enjoyed designing my island in a routine, orderly, and artistically pleasing fashion as I aligned my apple, orange, peach, and cherry trees to form bountiful fruit orchards in a recurring pattern. I cherished the routine of changing seasons and the structured expectations of holidays and celebrations within the game.

Routine gentleness and softness found through community wealth was promoted throughout the game as anyone can shake trees for bell currency within the game. *ACNH* animals and I shared gifts daily which satisfies my neurodivergent desire to express my appreciation of friends through gift giving. This dream world of community wealth centered within the game supports Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice interdependent and sustainable communities of care as we have been taught individualism, scarcity, and fear thinking to be the expected way of being. Within *ACNH*, we live in a world of routine gentleness and softness where community wealth is the norm. My Pilipinx ancestors and interconnected communities support gift giving as a form of community wealth and care. Sharing our fish, butterflies, bugs, art, fashion, homes, and gardens with each other in the game allowed us to manifest Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice dream worlds of routine softness and gentleness where we share, play, and rest together in interdependent and sustainable communities of care settling in and expanding into our authentic selves in relationship with each other.

## Comfy and Cozy Community



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Image-2-Pau-Abustan.jpg>

Figure 2. Screenshot of ACNH.

During pandemic times, *ACNH* supported a comfy and cozy community. Comfy and cozy communities grant us unlimited permission to rest, to settle in, and to expand into our authentic selves in relation to others near and far. Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice interdependent and sustainable communities of care and connection is found within comfy and cozy cultures. I often do my best to support and foster comfy and cozy cultures within my life, friendships, activisms, and teaching since our settler colonial cis-hetero-sexist-racist-ableist and neoliberal world promotes fast-paced living, productivity, stress, and feelings of inadequacy. A comfy and cozy community fostered within *ACNH* allowed me and my animal *ACNH* friends and friends in real life to relax and settle into our unapologetic neurodivergent, chronically ill, disabled, transgender, non-binary, queer, femme, and BIPOC selves in community with others. We reveled in sharing our love for our special interests together, comfy and cozy, often while wearing our pajamas lounging on our sofas and beds. Queer, crip, and femme of color disability justice activists such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha center how sofas and beds are worlds as they cultivate crip dreams for futures which grant people boundless access to quality basic needs of rest and community connection where all access needs are prioritized and met.<sup>8</sup>

Comfy and cozy community took place when my animal *ACNH* friends and friends in real life celebrated our birthdays together within the game and in real life. Birthdays can be lonely and a time when anti-disabled, anti-transgender, anti-queer, and other traumatic memories of unsupportive family and friends can resurface. Celebrating birthdays with

supportive chosen family and friends both within *ACNH* and in the real world can cultivate new comfy and cozy rituals of appreciation and joy for our multiply marginalized communities who are often not granted respect and dignity in society. *ACNH* became a space where my multiply marginalized communities and I can celebrate our existence and friendship with ease. With *ACNH*, I am never alone or forgotten on my birthday when my animal *ACNH* friends surprise me with a birthday party, cupcakes, and a pinata. In addition to the game, friends in real life shared strawberry cupcakes, veggie lumpia, veggie pancit, and gifts in a socially distanced manner. *ACNH* created a space for us to laugh and enjoy a comfy and cozy community where we expressed gratitude and bliss over the creativity of our decolonial and disability justice islands of interdependence. We shared our neurodivergent special interests centering our expansive love for Studio Ghibli, Hello Kitty, Pokémon, anime, and animated storytelling. Comfy and cozy community granted us permission, time, and space to relax within the game and in real life, in virtual and socially distanced community.

### Queer and Crip Friendships



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Image-3-Pau-Abustan.jpg>

Figure 3. Screenshot of *ACNH*.

Queer critical race feminists such as Karma Chávez share how play is queer when we live in a world that does not invite us to play and connect with each other in deeply intimate ways so that we may collaborate together to challenge and transform systems.<sup>9</sup> Queer crip of color feminists such as Shayda Kafai share with us how queer and crip play found within crip kinships, crip friendships, crip intimacies, and crip centric liberated zones is resistance when our society does not center and validate the vast and immeasurable community

building of multiply marginalized disabled people.<sup>10</sup> According to queer and two-spirit Indigenous scholars, queer actively refuses colonial norms of constructed binaries and expectations breaking down the walls built between communities.<sup>11</sup> Queer of color scholars center how queer movements create alliances, friendships, and coalitions with those who resist oppressive systems of living.<sup>12</sup>

Queer crip of color feminist critiques from Sami Schalk and Jina Kim further connect queer, feminist, and crip of color communities together who challenge harmful status quo systems used to divide our communities and instead prioritizes multi-issue movements which actively links communities and issues together as inseparable.<sup>13</sup> Disabled and queer Asian American scholars such as Mimi Khúc names the systemic unwellness of our lives operating in built to be broken education and societal systems and institutions.<sup>14</sup> Access intimacy brought forth by Mia Mingus centers the urgency for our access needs to be intimately known and met through our active listening, education, and cultivating of care with chosen family and friends.<sup>15</sup> My multiply marginalized friends and I found queer and crip play to support access intimacy friendships within and outside of *ACNH*. My animal *ACNH* friends and friends in real life cultivated accessible and crip kinship friendships where we were patient and playful with each other ensuring our access needs were and continue to be met.

In and out of the game, our community of friends practiced routine gentleness and softness when we paused and slowed down when one was not feeling well. We understood when one couldn't communicate that day or for days to months. We asked how we can support each other in the ways we can. We called each other nicknames of fondness to promote neurodivergent camaraderie of reveling in the intricacies of the brilliance of creating words which match ourselves and our feelings best. Since I asked my animal *ACNH* friends to call me Pikachu and Scorbunny as they are my favorite Pokémon, I invited my friends in real life to call me nicknames of endearment as well. Animal *ACNH* friends called me Anak as it means child in Pilipinx Tagalog, a term of love. Queer and crip friendships fostered in and out of *ACNH* showcase Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice worlds of interdependence, crip kinship, and access intimacy which actively protest and refuse worlds and systems of productivity, isolation, and disconnection.

## Playfulness of Communication



Figure 4. Screenshot of ACNH.

Crip kinship and friendship took place within *ACNH* and in real life when animal *ACNH* friends and friends in real life engaged in playful and accessible communication including non-verbal, kinesthetic, visual, and artistic communication in a socially distanced manner revolving around our special interests. Neurodivergent leaders of color center the critical need for neurodivergent people to access multiple forms of communication access and moments and spaces of rest in order to minimize sensory overload.<sup>16</sup> Non-verbal communication access is encouraged in and out of the game as we chatted with each other through the text feature of the game and through text messaging and social media chats on our phones and laptops. We did our best to foster neurodivergent-friendly environments which minimized meltdowns. We turned down the volume and brightness of our game if needed. We lay down and covered ourselves in comfy and cozy blankets. We rested. We created islands friendly to our neurodivergent needs of playful communication and filled with creative themes related to our special interests. Playful communication is intertwined with visual and artistic communication as we witnessed the creativity of each other's islands without needing to talk out loud or type chat in the game.

Friends in real life visited each other's islands and drew art on each other's bulletin boards to communicate with each other in a playful, creative, and artistic fashion. We shared our art worlds of forests, seashores, and ocean views. Crip kinship and friendship supports accessible and playful communication in a socially distanced and consent-based manner, depending on if we have enough spoons that day to engage in interactive community together. Our friendships are not forced, with clear boundaries shared if we have time and



energy to play or chat that day. Crip kinships and friendships unapologetically center our special interests and love for cute and adorable things and experiences without shame, minimization, and erasure. We playfully communicate in a socially distanced manner during uncertain pandemic times. *ACNH* allowed us to settle into and expand into our authentic selves in relation to our interconnected communities and in alignment with Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice worlds of crip centric liberated zones of sustainable and interdependent community care.

### Interconnected and Interdependent Relaxation



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Image-5-Pau-Abustan.jpg>

Figure 5. Screenshot from *ACNH*.

*ACNH* supported relaxation and meditation with interconnected and interdependent communities inside and outside of the game. Ocean waves crashing on our sandy beaches calmed us as uncertainties regarding the pandemic grew. Planting, growing, and caring for our flowers with friends soothed us during unstable times as we connected over our appreciation for the nature-based aesthetics of the game. Interconnectedness and interdependence took place in and out of the game as we checked in and played together. *ACNH* became a reflection of what our multiply marginalized communities crave for in this world: Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice dream worlds of interconnected, interdependent, and sustainable communities of care.

# Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa in Youth Learning and Popular Culture

Queer and chronically ill BIPOC feminists such as Audre Lorde imagined dream worlds where marginalized people can rest, settle, and feel at home with their authentic selves and chronically ill and queer bodies.<sup>17</sup> For example, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa dreamed of internally imagined and externally realized worlds where interconnected communities break down constructed borders built between us.<sup>18</sup> *ACNH* is an inwardly imagined and outwardly manifested dream world where queer, crip, neurodivergent, chronically ill, disabled, and BIPOC people in relation to animal, plant, earth, water, and air beings thrive. It is a Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa decolonial and disability justice world of queer and crip rest and joy with sustainable communities of interdependent care and connection.

Those of us who live at the margins of society seek a world where gentleness and softness is routine, a world where we relax into our authentic selves in comfy and cozy community, a world of neurodivergent, queer, and crip friendships, a world of interconnectedness and interdependence, relaxation and meditation, where we thrive in moments of rest and joy. Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds are what my ancestors, communities, and I long for past, present, and future. Our society has much to learn from the leadership and wisdom of youth learning and youth popular culture animated storytelling as they are portals to community building and learning together. These Queer Crip Pilipinx Kapwa dream worlds of interdependence and sustainable communities of care bring us back to Ngọc Loan Trần's call for our multiply marginalized communities to call each other in.<sup>19</sup> It is critical for all people to build collective systems and sustainable worlds of care where beings are called in, cared for, and not pushed out. Disabled and queer BIPOC scholars, healers, and activists such as Aurora Levins Morales remind us how our interconnected and interdependent communities continue to engage in multi-issue movements locally and globally as we dream and manifest healing and liberation together.<sup>20</sup> Our inseparable, interconnected, and interdependent communities need each other for our survival and for thriving in our collective dreaming, care, rest, and joy together.

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[View all of Pau Abustan's articles.](#)

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## Autistic, Surviving, and Thriving Under COVID-19: Imagining Inclusive Autistic Futures—A Zine Making Project

by The Re•Storying Autism Collective, Sherri Liska, Kat Singer, Emily Gillespie, Sheryl Peters and Patty Douglas | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** This article takes up Mia Mingus' call to "leave evidence" of how we have lived, loved, cared, and resisted under ableist neoliberalism and necropolitics during COVID-19. We include images of artistic work from activist zines created online during the COVID-19 pandemic and led by the Re•Storying Autism Collective. The zines evidence lived experiences of crisis and heightening systemic and intersectional injustices, as well as resistance through activist art, crip community, crip knowledges, digital research creation, and the forging of collective hope for radically inclusive autistic futures—what zine maker Emily Gillespie calls "The neurodivergent, Mad, accessible, Basic Income Revolution." We frame the images of artistic work with a coauthored description of the Collective's dream to create neurodivergent art, do creative research, and work for disability justice under COVID-19. The zine project was a gesture of radical hope during crisis and a dream for future possibilities infused with crip knowledges that have always been here. We contend that activist digital artmaking is a powerful way to archive, theorize, feel, resist, co-produce, and crip knowledge, and a way to dream collectively that emerged through the crisis of COVID-19. This is a new, collective, affective, and aesthetic form of evidence and call for "forgetting" ableist capitalist colonialism and Enlightenment modes of subjectivity and knowledge production that target different bodies to exploit, debilitate, and/or eliminate, and to objectify and flatten what it means to be and become human and to thrive together.

**KEYWORDS** art, necropolitics, making, crip, activism, community, autism, neurodivergence, zine

## Introduction

In the face of the COVID-19 global health pandemic and intensifying barriers to life— isolation, poverty, loss of supports, and the devaluing of autistic lives—the Re•Storying

Autism Collective (hereafter the Collective) began meeting online during the spring of 2020. The Collective is a group of autistic and neurodivergent artists, students, co-researchers, makers, and critical allies across northern Turtle Island (Canada) who gather to cultivate online autistic community, create activist art and advise on, develop, and lead research.<sup>1</sup> Re•Storying Autism is an international research collaboration between autistic and non-autistic community members, artists, researchers, family and kin, educators, practitioners, and critical allies working for disability justice in education, broadly conceived. It is led by neurodivergent researcher Patty Douglas.<sup>2</sup> Disability justice is a political, arts, and intellectual movement of Black, brown, queer, trans, and disabled people that “means that we are not left behind; we are beloved, kindred, needed.”<sup>3</sup>

As the pandemic began to restrict our lives, the Collective started to dream together during our monthly online meetings about making neurodivergent art and telling autistic stories that might help us connect, survive, and thrive. We found ourselves facing heightening barriers that have long marked non-normative lives for exclusion and, as philosopher Achille Mbembe tells us, even death (both figuratively and literally). Mbembe describes the late modern impulse to systemically contain individuals and groups that fail to embody the valued autonomous, productive individual as *necropolitics*, “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead.”<sup>4</sup> It is Black, brown, poor, disabled, global South and other non-normative lives that are subjected to such living conditions. Whether through exclusion (be it from life-saving treatment during a global health crisis, or education, employment, and arts spaces), curative therapies, or murder (by our caregivers or by police), our humanity and personhood have long been denied. Through misunderstanding and distorted media tropes (such as the lost or stolen child, the savant, or autistic people as dangerous),<sup>5</sup> our authority to tell our own stories has been questioned or forbidden.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic laid bare these realities in the starkest of terms.

## Making Outsider Art: Cultivating Crip Community through Radically Inclusive Praxis

The idea to facilitate a zine-making workshop with autistic makers emerged when Collective member Kat Singer suggested digital zines as the perfect medium to express autistic pandemic experiences and to push back against the loss of supports and community that we were experiencing. Zines (short for “magazines”) are a DIY (do-it-yourself) pamphlet-like type of art that often document experiences of marginalization and push back against power. This form of DIY publication has a low barrier for entry as it can be entirely handmade (and then photocopied or scanned for distribution) and can feature a

wide range of media (pen and ink, collage, typed or handwritten text). Content comes in many forms (comics, poems, essays, illustrations etc.).<sup>7</sup>

We chose the medium of digital zines in particular for its flexibility. It gave us a way to support makers who were remote during a pandemic and who may or may not have had access to art supplies and/or artistic support for hand drawn work. A digital medium also opened ways to widely share zines through online networks (websites, online exhibits) while also retaining the possibility to print them for future in-person exhibits. The digital medium and format also align with preferred ways to be in community such as blogging and online gaming.<sup>8</sup>

During the fall of 2020, the Collective planned, organized, and facilitated a seven-week online zine making workshop series. We invited sixteen autistic makers and artists sixteen years of age and over across northern Turtle Island to artfully express and challenge the dehumanization and devastation, as well as the possibilities we/they were experiencing. This workshop series was led and facilitated by autistic members Kat Singer, Sherri Liska, and Besa Shemovski Thomas (with contributions by Steacy Easton and David Preyde), who developed and delivered a zine-making curriculum including tutorials on the artistic and technical aspects of creating a zine online. We share an image below (Fig. 1) from our zine-making curriculum to familiarize any unfamiliar reader with what a zine is, and to bring them closer to the feel of the activity that took place in our workshop in the midst of a global health pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

**What's a ZINE anyway?**

any self-published unique work of minority interest

- ★ small publication (typically fewer than 1000 copies)
- ★ independently created and published
- ★ profit is not the primary intent
- ★ can use original or appropriated imagery

It's pronounced like "ZEEN", as it's short for "magazine"

"niche stories for niche audiences"

Printing press (1600 - ), 1930-1960: Mimeograph (1930-1960), Xerography (photocopying) (invented 1944, popularized in 1980s), IBM Selectric Typewriter (1961), Internet (early 2000s)

Zines – pamphlet-like, often non-professional publications – have long been associated with grassroots activism as a means of raising awareness and challenging accepted narratives. While some exist simply to celebrate a cultural niche, others are a platform for those who feel their voice isn't being heard elsewhere, typically offering a low-cost, DIY means of protest.

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2019/apr/26/from-ecocore-to-hot-hot-hot-the-thriving-market-for-sustainable-zines>

Figure 1. A slide from the zine-making curriculum titled "What is a ZINE anyway?" This introduction to zines was led by Collective member Kat Singer.

As the Collective planned ways to create accessible online space for participants, we identified core values that would animate the space, including radical access, flexibility, and relaxed ways of taking part. We drew inspiration from activist histories of outsider and disability arts<sup>10</sup> as well as from disability justice, critical digital pedagogy and Relaxed Performance.<sup>11</sup> Critical digital pedagogy puts justice at the centre of any approach. As Stommel, Friend, and Morris put it, critical digital pedagogy “reclaim[s] the critical aims of education, its questioning and reflection, its imperative toward justice and equity, and its persistent need to read the world within which it takes place, whether that’s a classroom, a livingroom, a playground or a digital device.”<sup>12</sup> As a collective, we critically “read” the online space for radical access opportunities. Relaxed performance, a movement started by autistic community in the 1990s to welcome all bodies and open access to theatre and the arts by challenging norms such as stillness and silence during performances, also shaped the terms of our workshop space. Below is our infographic, “Accessible Online Space,” (Figs. 2–3) that we created and shared with participants. It makes our commitments and orientation to radical access concrete (see paragraph below for more on radical access). It was generated through the Collective’s many discussions of how to set the terms of online space beyond an accessibility checklist alone, and, at times, across conflicting access requirements (for example, staying on schedule versus crip time, an orientation to time that moves with the needs and desires of those present in the workshop).<sup>13</sup>

# A Guide to **ACCESSIBLE ONLINE SPACE**

This guide was written by the Re•Storying Autism in Education Co-Researcher Collective. The Re•Storying project aims to improve inclusion in education with and for autistic and neurodivergent people. To learn more, please visit [www.restoryingautism.com/collective](http://www.restoryingautism.com/collective)

## Our Values:



We value **access** to online events for all



We value **flexibility**—different ways to participate in online events.



We value **relaxed ways to connect** with each other in online events.

## We aim to create an accessible and inclusive online space:



Asking you before events about access considerations



Offering help with technology such as Zoom



Providing information about events in advance (e.g., schedules, zoom links, pictures of facilitators, questions we plan to ask)



Paying for the cost of any software such as Canva used in our events



Offering call-in options by phone to our online events

A Guide to Accessible Online Space  
[douglas@brandonu.ca](mailto:douglas@brandonu.ca)

© Re•Storying Autism in Education

Special thanks to Sherri Liska and Madeleine Kruth  
for their work on this guide.



Figure 2. "A Guide to Accessible Online Space," < <http://www.restoryingautism.com/collective> > an infographic designed by Besa Shemovski Thomas, was created based on the Collective's accessibility guide. The lead author of the guide is Sherri Liska.



# ACCESSIBLE ONLINE SPACE



Providing written follow-up to events and updates



Close captioning and recording talks when possible and with privacy options (e.g., turning your camera off and renaming yourself so you are not visible)



Posting video recordings of talks and workshops so you can review them as often as you like



Inviting participants to take part in relaxed ways. For example, you will have the choice of using a chosen name, turning your camera on or off during events and using the chat option on Zoom



Scheduling breaks for longer events



Providing trigger warnings for sensory or other possibly distressing content with options such as providing you a written or verbal description of the content, or opting out



Typing out questions for you

Figure 3. On the second page, the list of commitments continues.

By radical access we mean that we strove to identify and eliminate barriers to access in a variety of areas—finances, technology, communication, skills, trauma, and more—through built-in supports including but not limited to covering the purchase of design software Canva Pro, paying a modest stipend to participants for their time, and providing digital downloads of all synchronous tutorials and group sessions. We also invited participants to set up one-on-one creative or supportive sessions with facilitators of their choice and



embraced participants' preferred communication styles (speaking, typing, emojis, or even none at all), intentionally creating text-accompanied, unambiguous, visually organized, yet relaxed presentations. Further, we provided suggestions and guidelines for participants to maximize the accessibility of their digital works for their viewers (e.g., image descriptions, high contrast text). Sherri Liska led the Collective's access initiatives and wrote a guide including these elements for workshop participants.<sup>14</sup> After the workshop series was over, we held a one-hour focus group with interested participants about how the workshop design and our efforts around radical access were experienced by participants and lived on in people's lives. We learned that the online workshop series, by bringing autistic makers together virtually, opened unique pathways to cultivate autistic community (for some participants, this was their first time being in autistic space led by autistic people), extended disability arts/neurodivergent arts networks in Canada, and, for some participants, led to the launch of their own art exhibits.

At the same time, the radical access we worked to cultivate in our online workshop series had limits. Technological, material, and other frictions arose during the workshop series in the sense that Hamraie and Fritsch write about in "Crip Technoscience Manifesto," where they describe "access-making as a site of political friction and contestation."<sup>15</sup> Despite our collective efforts, we were unable to eliminate all of the material, structural, or technological barriers makers faced. Recognizing that access is not a checklist that, once satisfied, can guarantee access for everyone in every context, we endeavoured to use moments of friction generatively and reflexively to advance disability justice. By providing one-to-one supports, pausing in the flow of the workshop to slow it down or hold space, revising our schedule, or using the private chat function during large group meetings, facilitators worked as "access doulas" to collectively bring access into being as the workshop series unfolded.<sup>16</sup> For example, we encountered a number of technological challenges. Some makers were not able to resolve issues with Canva Pro on their own by using our video tutorials or through screen sharing during group meetings. Some of these challenges were resolved during one-to-one meetings with facilitators, but we did feel in the end that in-person options would have helped some makers to better achieve the visual effects they had in mind. This was a limit of COVID-19 and the geographic spread of our workshop series. Some makers who identified as multiply disabled also told us that even though they had been making zines for years, they almost did not sign up for the workshop because they were worried about learning Canva during a pandemic over a limited number of weeks online. So we wonder about the makers who were not there, and what other supports and options (such as sending concrete materials to people at their homes or making a greater variety of video tutorials) we could have provided. We also faced access frictions in terms of scheduling. To offer flexibility to makers who worked or had other commitments during the day, we varied meeting times to include some evening meetings. This posed challenges for others who found it difficult to adapt to a changing schedule

from week to week. To find ways to navigate this, we offered one-to-one meetings at preferred times set by makers, a visual schedule well ahead of the workshop series and regular email reminders. We also had open conversations about access frictions in our large group meetings and collectively recognized access as ongoing and always incomplete.

Another access friction emerged around the legacy of whiteness in autistic identity/diagnosis and community. An autistic person of color in the workshop raised the issue of feeling uncomfortable in a group that appeared white. The lead facilitator at the time, Patty Douglas, attempted to hold space for and affirm this makers' experience, but ultimately failed to provide a sense of belonging or access for this maker. Another facilitator also reached out through private chat, and Patty reached out by email afterwards. Ultimately, this maker chose not to complete the workshop series, reflecting our team's failure to fully redress the legacy of whiteness in autism diagnosis, identity, and self-advocacy, despite our recruitment efforts (including specific recruitment calls for participation by autistic makers of color as both facilitators and participants) and efforts to affirm and hold space. We have reflected deeply about this moment of failure and unresolved access friction. Many autistic people of color took part in the interviews we held in parallel to the zine making workshop, and so we wonder what other barriers related to white supremacy and/or class we may have reproduced in our workshop design, whether this was the intensive time commitment required, the workshop focus, the university research ethics' limits on participant financial compensation, the nature of our newly developing relationships with autistics of color or Indigenous autistic makers, or some other reason. Since the zine making workshop, Douglas has focused much of her research time on decolonizing stories of autism. She has formed reciprocal relationships with Māori community leaders in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Indigenous organizations in Manitoba, Canada, and has held Re•Storying workshops (multimedia video making) on topics such as Indigenous approaches to autism identified by these communities as priorities. Like for the zine workshop, Douglas has acted in the role of holder of space and helper from the sidelines from her position as a neurodivergent university faculty member. This work, too, is always incomplete and ongoing.<sup>17</sup>

## The Images

We include here images of artistic work from zines created in our online workshop series. Singer, Liska, and Douglas co-curated this collection of images with artistic and technical support from project coordinator and artist Sheryl Peters. To choose the images, we gathered in person (after COVID restrictions lifted) with physical copies of the zines, read through them together, and weighed a number of factors including aesthetic appeal, visual

impact, affective content, thematic content, and representation (e.g., zines by diverse autistic makers in terms of gender and sexuality, multiple disabilities, professional artists versus first-time makers, etc.). Image descriptions were also co-created, staying as close as possible to makers' own words offered in their artist statements. We believe the set of images we curated reflects creators' common experiences. We group images into four themes: "COVID Isolation and Barriers", "Masking and Unmasking During COVID-19,"<sup>18</sup> "Humor as Resistance," and "Autistic Community and Hope." More broadly, the themes are also resonant with our co-analysis of thirty-five interviews held alongside the zine-making workshop with autistic makers across Turtle Island.

We invite readers to spend time with the images, descriptions, and text. In keeping with zines as outsider art and our collaborative approach, we do not perform an in-depth academic analysis here,<sup>19</sup> although our image descriptions, informed by the work of blind scholar Hannah Thompson and blind artist Jessica Watkin on image description as its own artful practice, include interpretative and affective analytic elements.<sup>20</sup> We invite readers to document their thoughts and feelings on a collaborative "Autistic, Surviving and Thriving" page < <http://www.restoryingautism.com/collaborate>> (click on "Read More" and enter the password: zines). The questions we ask viewers to consider are artful ones often used by Re•Storying during viewing events on the project, "What is it that the makers are asking us to see, feel or sense that might be new? How do the stories touch and move us?" "If you could ask the zine maker a question, what would it be?" We also offer a gentle content warning. The images presented reflect a full range of experiences under COVID-19, from connection, celebration, and joy to pain and distress. We invite you to practice what we call a care-full neuro-crip viewing—reading slowly, skipping over pages, having a comfort item close by, reaching out to someone you trust, stimming (repetitive movements), or something else that makes you feel good.

## COVID Isolation and Barriers

Isolation was a prominent theme across the zines made in our workshop series. In the set of images we curated for this section, the beholder encounters the disconnection and overwhelm of unpredictable pandemic restrictions and rapid adaptations like Zoom.

Em Farquhar-Barrie's "Alone in the City" (Fig. 4)—unexpectedly detailed for a piece drawn in only black pen—depicts a twisted, distorted cityscape in which the artist feels lost, alone, and powerless. In the foreground, nameless and numberless buildings jut and tilt in various directions. Some have flashy, decorative, but abstract entrances; others are made of simple brick or only windows. Some are three-dimensional; some are flat. The buildings are crammed next to and in front of each other, and the features of each are dense and sketchy, evoking a sense that this city is boundless, untraversable, and impossible to

comprehend. In the background, much taller office buildings fill the page all the way to the top. Densely packed with lit windows, the giants tilt and swirl, consumed by a dark whirlpool that spirals behind one lone silhouette of a person, limply floating and faceless. Above the figure, two clouds and a few sparse stars—the only remnants of a dwindling, degrading night sky—swirl, too, into the all-consuming spiral.



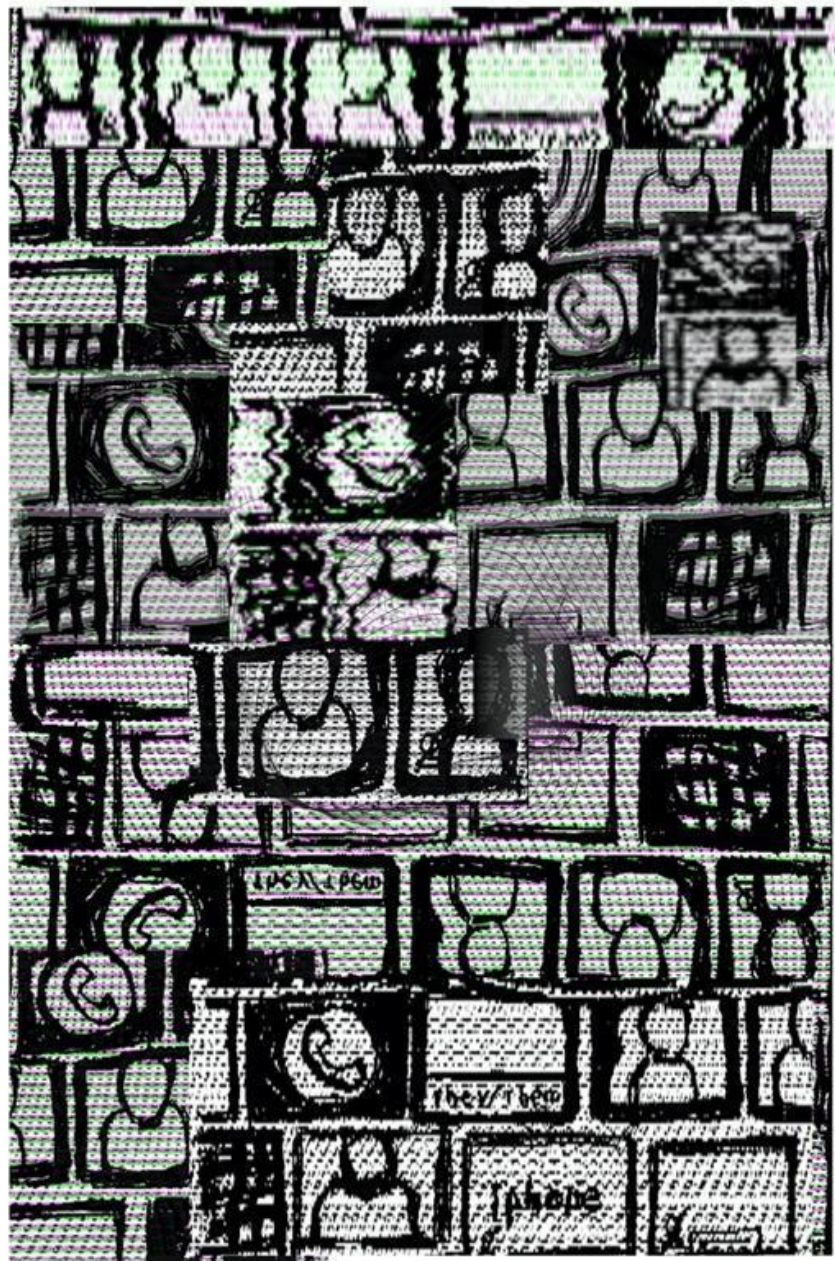
*Alone in the City*

Figure 4. "Alone in the City" from *Where Did Everyone Go?* <  
<https://www.restoryingautism.com/zinemaking-workshop>> by Em Farquhar-Barrie.

Farquhar-Barrie blends pen drawings and the digitally-altered versions of those drawings into a dense and complicated collage in "Zoom" (Fig. 5). The piece represents the sensory overwhelm of a Zoom environment: we are crowded, yet alone. Pen drawings of screens, each firm-handed yet sketchy, fill the page. Blank screens, screens with faces, screens



with text, screens with TV static, and screens with telephone icons overlap each other, patternless and dense, some right-side-up and some upside-down, all running Zoom. The faces are indistinguishable and featureless, speaking but never emerging. Are they omnipresent? Are they not present at all? A “TV pixel” effect overlays the whole image while a “weak TV signal” effect distorts random parts. It’s as if the artist isn’t using Zoom like the others but watching their meetings, classes, appointments, and workshops play out on television—they are disconnected, unable to participate, and alone in a sea of faces.



*Zoom*

Figure 5. “Zoom” by Em Farquhar-Barrie.

In Mandy Klein's "Change, Change, Change" (Fig. 6), each instance of "change" is in a different, neon color, and all of the text glows, as if it were a blinking neon sign. The choice to use neon signs—a source of sensory overwhelm for many autistic people—helps to represent that change, too, can be deeply overwhelming.



Figure 6. "Change, Change, Change" from *COVID/AUTISM* by Mandy Klein.

Access for autistic and disabled people during the pandemic was often not considered by decision-makers and systems.<sup>21</sup> Makers in this section also point to how systems separated autistic and disabled students from mainstream schooling during COVID and



point to the injustice of years of pre-pandemic systemic denials of flexible learning options like online education for neurodivergent students which were so rapidly made possible during COVID-19 (see Fig. 7).

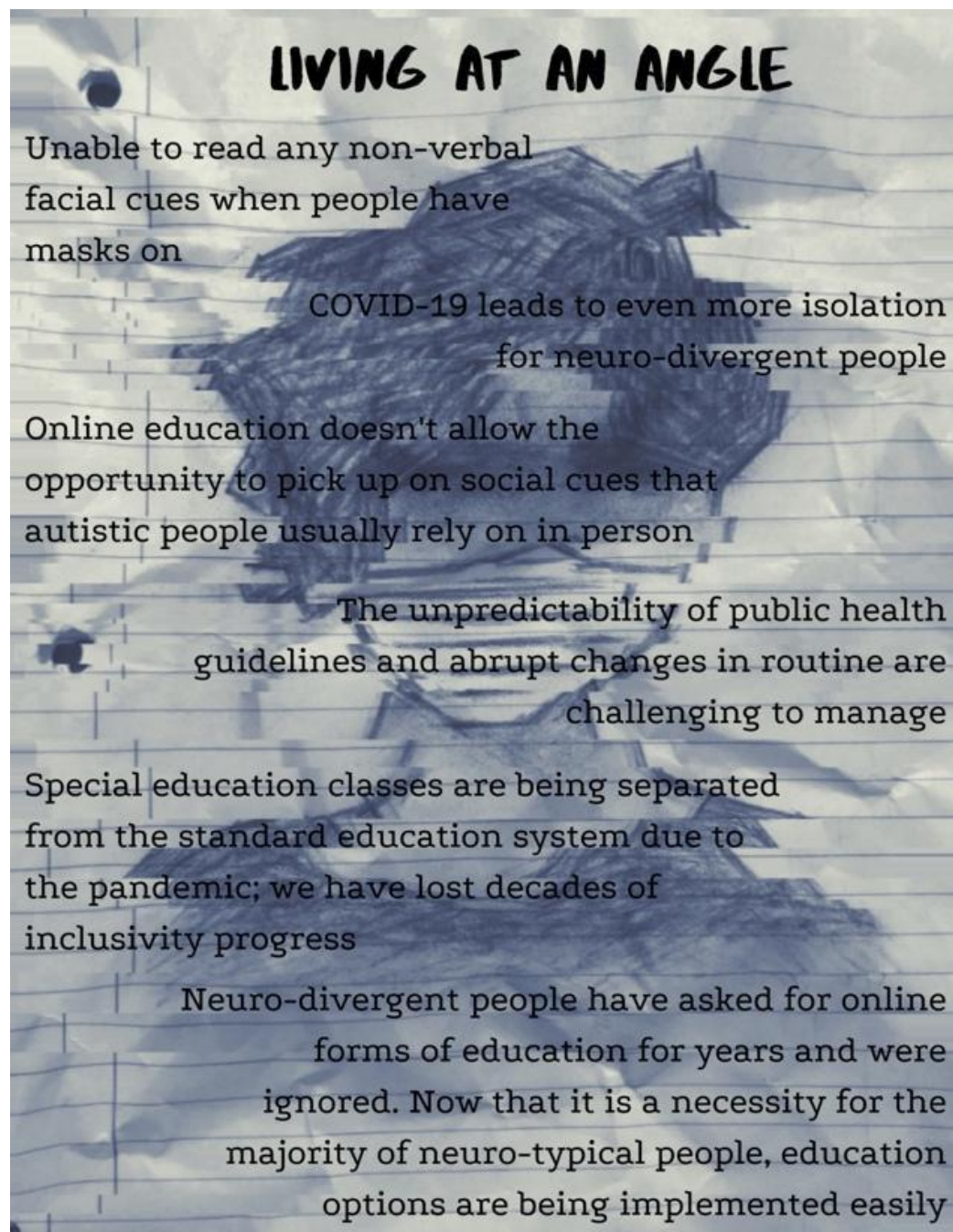


Figure 7. "Living at an Angle" from *Atypical* by Anonymous.

The zines in this section lay bare how necropolitics was at play during the pandemic through the targeted isolation of disabled bodies and their containment to the "status of the living dead."<sup>22</sup>

## Masking and Unmasking During COVID-19

Masking is a term many autistic people use to self-describe how they/we consciously or unconsciously hide or suppress our/their unique ways of being such as repetitive movements (called "stimming") to appear more typical and avoid stigma or discrimination. Masking is often described as painful and exhausting.<sup>23</sup> It came up as a theme across several of the zines in layered and complex ways, pushing the conversation about disability and COVID-19 in new directions.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image.jpg> >



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-1.jpg> >

Figure 8. "Untitled" by Lucabean.





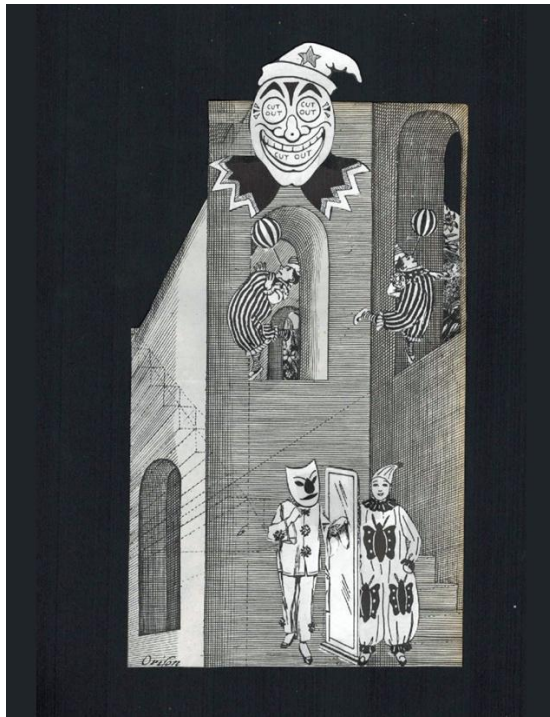
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[https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/veHucDoKZnT64\\_G2EFkm4PGCw4hyFP72qfRTTS\\_TvPBZ3ZgVDIY-G7VwEXKuZl0919T-Dqsj2Axkl0QBQ\\_xDIAG2Az0suYRZ54td4bMWnOw\\_JJhjP32hgutRlxZGs4rsHbAqCX\\_pijjEaXAHGhWQTg85BjrzX3-P25RSbrtY0fsWM4OvmwZkKcA3\\_0vVo0A](https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/veHucDoKZnT64_G2EFkm4PGCw4hyFP72qfRTTS_TvPBZ3ZgVDIY-G7VwEXKuZl0919T-Dqsj2Axkl0QBQ_xDIAG2Az0suYRZ54td4bMWnOw_JJhjP32hgutRlxZGs4rsHbAqCX_pijjEaXAHGhWQTg85BjrzX3-P25RSbrtY0fsWM4OvmwZkKcA3_0vVo0A)  
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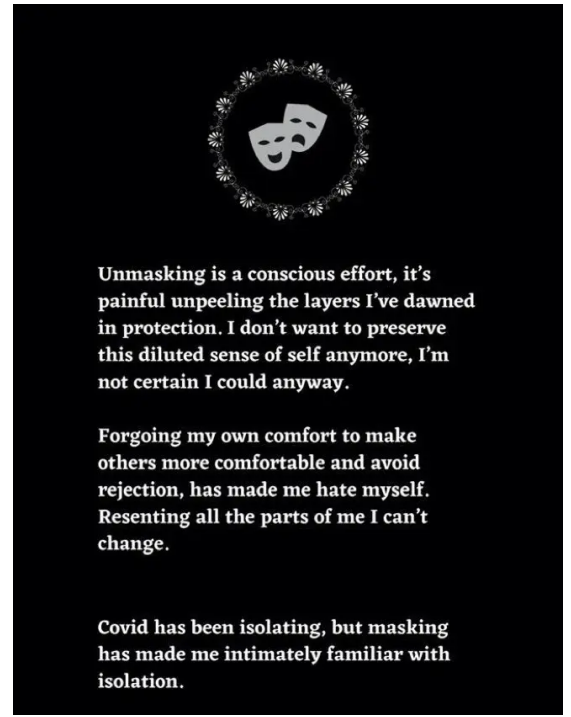
Familiarity will try to convince me that if I ride the wheel long enough I'll build resistance and figure out that trick all the other passengers seem to know. But all I'm really doing is ignoring my discomfort, refusing myself safety so I don't feel left out.

I still feel left out.

< [https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/tO-88iVTIVZcEqwDNcomB4wF3W6I\\_vHV8KJcKWjJD8LpC02WdKnEGFeKs1Ai3UITwhGWI2GTSWIJt0juMCvsw4ZTlaAaK5GbEp9FMmadCqpcOz\\_Yusk3koEtuc09Y9wWHH8ZzBSLGS0nFno80tYQnngGXBTfD6lj3KsRNQsB8mlhpoH2VtcXaRQWntqhBg](https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/tO-88iVTIVZcEqwDNcomB4wF3W6I_vHV8KJcKWjJD8LpC02WdKnEGFeKs1Ai3UITwhGWI2GTSWIJt0juMCvsw4ZTlaAaK5GbEp9FMmadCqpcOz_Yusk3koEtuc09Y9wWHH8ZzBSLGS0nFno80tYQnngGXBTfD6lj3KsRNQsB8mlhpoH2VtcXaRQWntqhBg)>



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< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-3.jpg> >

Figure 9. "Autistic Unmasking in the Time of Covid-19" (two-page spreads) by Venus Underhill.

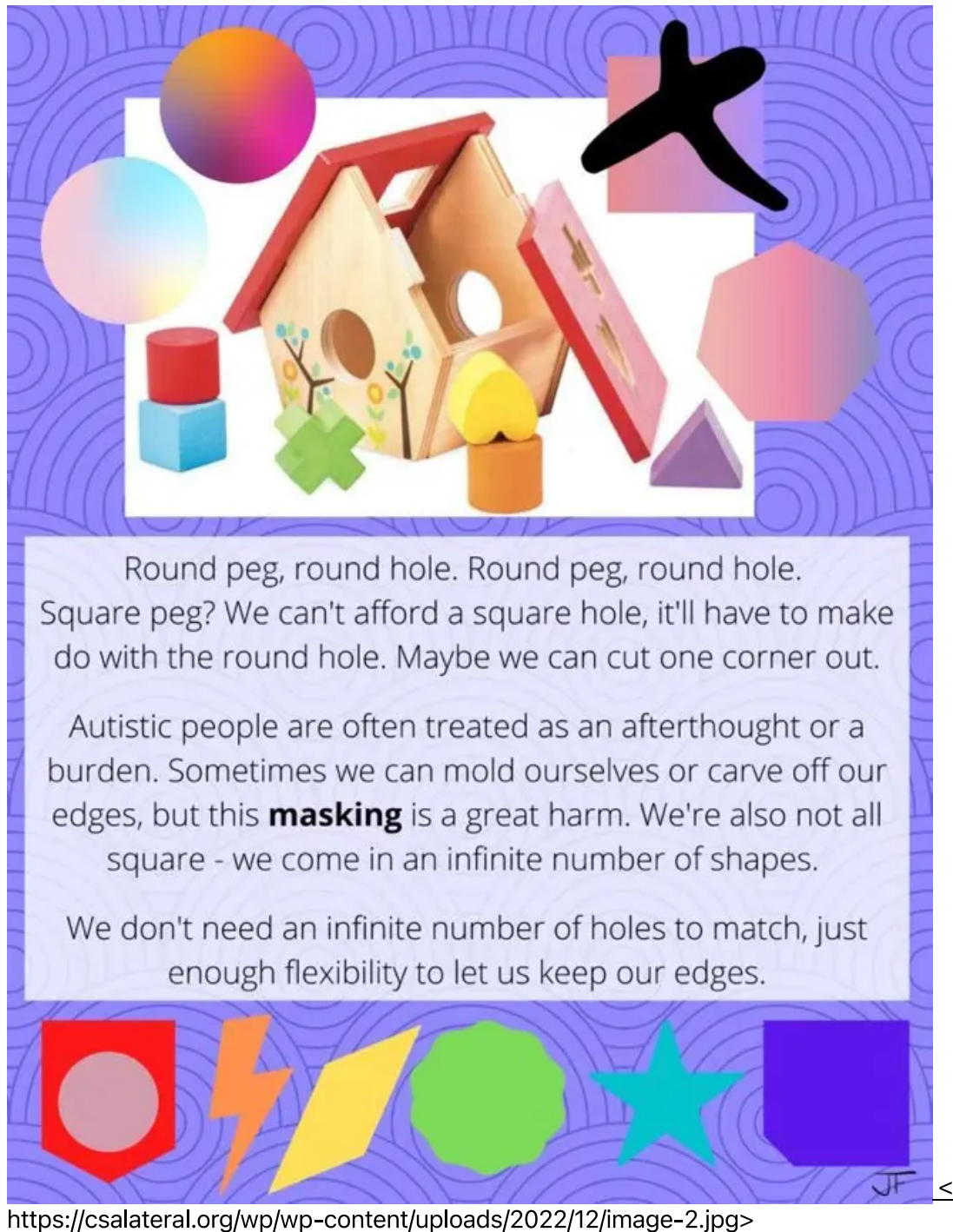


Figure 10. "Autism in Metaphors" by Jennifer Fehr.

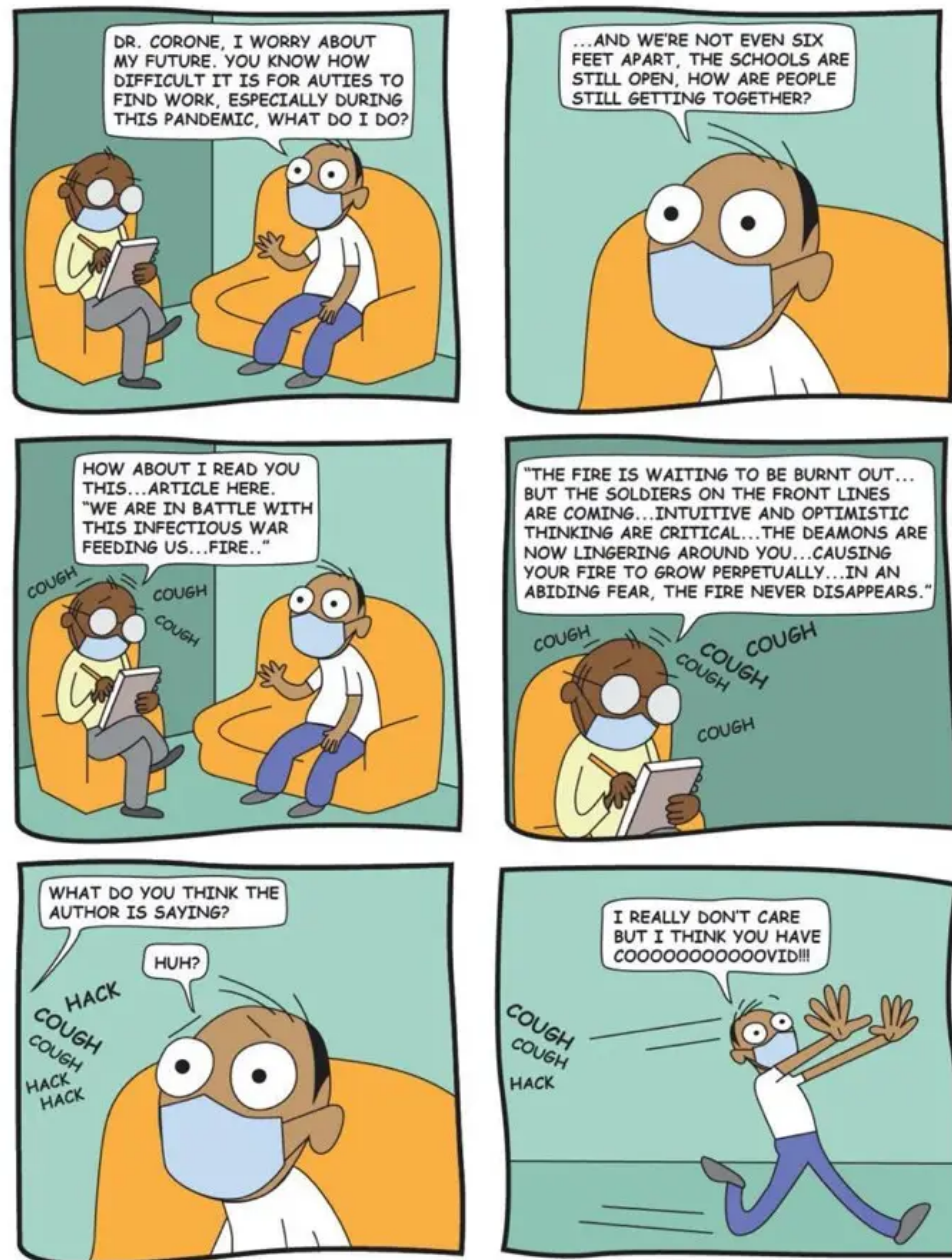
To sum up this section briefly, masking emerged in a multitude of ways across several of the zines. This plurality of articulations of masking complicates, first, assumptions around the effects of COVID-19 as solely negative or traumatic for autistic and disabled people, as in Lucabean's assertion (Fig. 8) that "nothing much changed" and that, "The only thing that has changed for me is that now I get to wear a mask (which are comfy)." As disability justice activists point out, autistic and disabled people already hold individual and collective wisdom about how to survive and even thrive under regimes that isolate, contain,

stigmatize, and marginalize those who are different.<sup>24</sup> In some ways, COVID-19 was nothing new. As Venus Underhill articulates in Figure 9, "Covid has been isolating but masking has made me intimately familiar with isolation." Underhill also pushes this conversation further with poetic reflections accompanying their artwork. They write, "I don't want to preserve this diluted sense of self anymore, I'm not certain I could anyway." Underhill seems to suggest that COVID-19 was an occasion where masking autistic ways of being could be suspended, at least for some autistic folks some of the time, given the shift to online school, work, and activities where you could turn your screen off or participate asynchronously. We do not wish to diminish, however, the pain of masking or of the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns for autistic and disabled people. Jennifer Fehr (Fig. 10) talks about the "great harm" that comes with inflexible systems and the imperative to mask embodied ways of being that are labeled autistic. In their jarring artwork, Underhill, too, alludes to the ableist imperative to mask as a kind of painful, frightening, disjointed, horror-filled "living death" (recall the image of the clown with the words "cut out" for eyes).<sup>25</sup>

### Humor as Resistance

Although we share only one zine image in this section, we include humor as resistance as a theme because it was prevalent in our discussions of the zines as a collective, as well as in Rose Bisk's comic strip (Fig. 11). Rose Bisk's satirical artwork offers a painfully honest, larger-than-life depiction of the miscommunication that often marks encounters between professionals and autistic people, only this time, our very survival is at stake during a pandemic. The main character, the client in the scenario, rather than being other or exceptional, asks the pragmatic questions all of us asked during the pandemic about how we might find work, about social distancing and pandemic contradictions—"the schools are still open"—and what the future might hold. The professional in the scene, however, is rigidly focussed on explaining COVID-19 to the client through incomprehensible metaphor after metaphor which only serves to heighten the main character's anxiety. The interaction in the session ends with the client exiting the scene in an exaggerated and dramatic way, and yet, the reader knows that the client is in fact the more humane, attuned, and pragmatic character. This is why the comic makes us laugh and yet it is painful, because this kind of failure of empathy is so commonly enacted by professionals with painful and life damaging effects. Through humor, Bisk in this way spotlights the dire need to attend to the humanity of autistic people during times of both crisis and the mundane.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-4.jpg> >

Figure 11. "Untitled" by Rose Bisk (see [full comic strip < https://www.restoryingautism.com/zines-1 >](https://www.restoryingautism.com/zines-1) ).

## Autistic Community and Hope

We do not offer up the theme of autistic community and hope in a naive or ideal sense. We are acutely aware that autistic community is fraught, marked by its own access frictions, hierarchies, and exclusions. For example, Tiffany Hammond, Black autistic mother of two

Black autistic sons in the United States, blogs about the white supremacy of global North autistic self-advocacy and the need to expand priorities and perspectives beyond that of the autonomous, white, (often) male appearing neoliberal subject.<sup>26</sup> Recall also from above that while the zine-making workshop was diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, and geographic location (rural, urban), it was not racially diverse in terms of leadership or participants. As described above, this in part reflects autism as an historically white, global North, and (ironically) economically privileged diagnosis/identity and the need on our project to ongoingly cultivate authentic relationships with BIPOC communities.<sup>27</sup> We also engage hope in a critical sense to mean the hope that emerges when care and affirming embodied difference as fundamental is dispersed across a community or collective rather than located in individuals alone.<sup>28</sup>

Hannah Monroe's zine (Fig. 12) demonstrates this critical hope and community through neighbourhood music jams during lockdown when she connected with others across social distance through music. Throughout the pandemic, Hannah tried to maintain a sense of community and meet her social needs via online paint nights. The painting shown in Figure 12 is the result of one such effort.

# Art and Music



Playing fiddle  
for my  
neighbor's  
birthday!

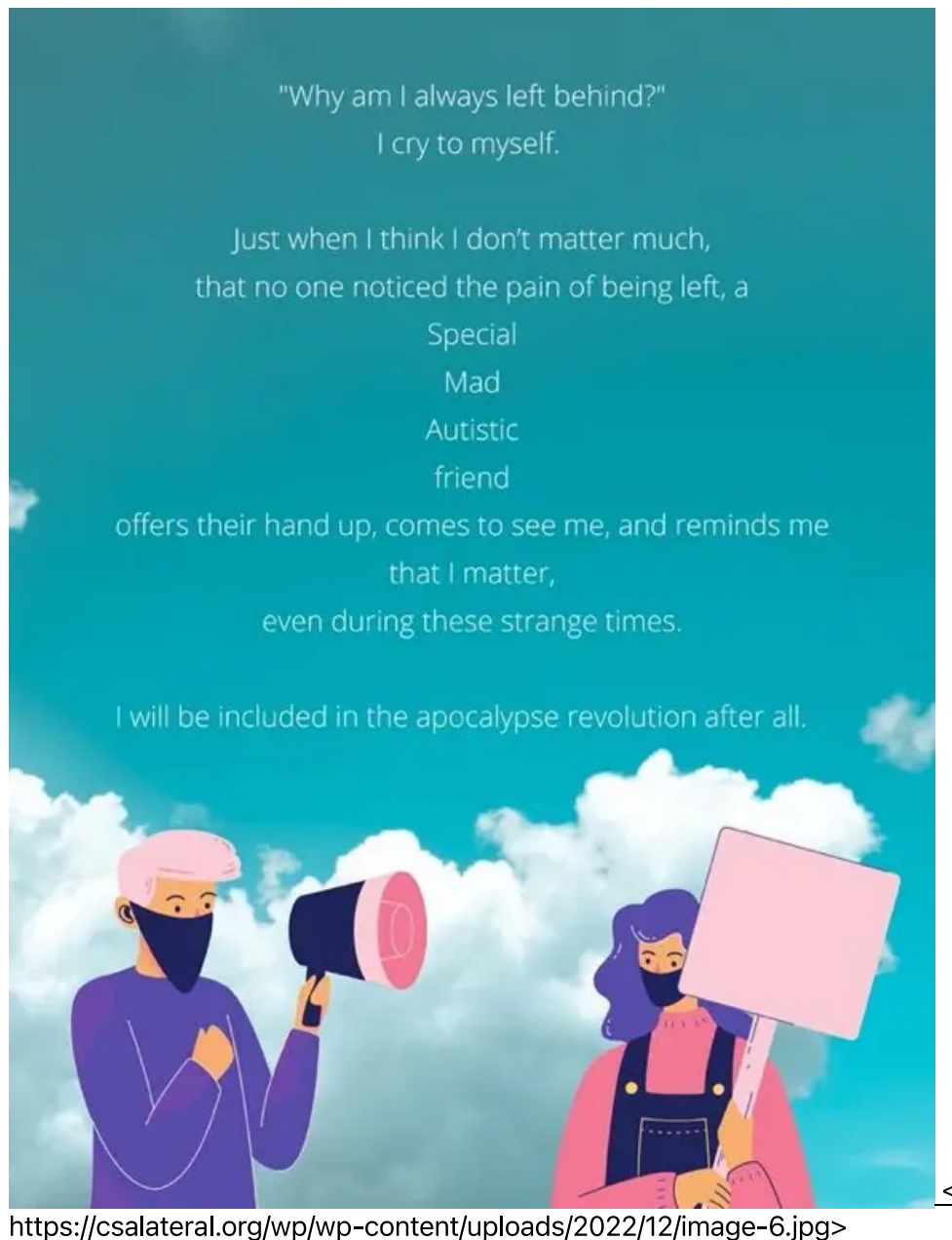
Community  
while  
physically  
distancing



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-5.jpg>

Figure 12. *Coping With Loneliness in Quarantine* by Hannah Monroe.

Emily Gillespie's zine (Fig. 13) , too, enacts critical hope and the simultaneous failure and success, pain and joy, of intersectional autistic community when she writes, "Just when I think I don't matter much, that no one noticed the pain of being left, a Special, Mad, Autistic, friend, offers their hand up, comes to see me, and reminds me that I matter, even during these strange times. I will be included in the apocalypse revolution after all."



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-6.jpg>

Figure 13. *Covid Bubbles & the Accessible Revolution* by Emily Gillespie.

The zines made in our workshop series communicate lived experiences of crisis and heightening systemic and intersectional injustice. The zines also show resistance through activist art, crip community, and crip knowledges of survival (and even thriving) during crisis. They convey the forging of collective hope for radically inclusive autistic futures—what zine maker Emily Gillespie calls “The neurodivergent, Mad, accessible, Basic Income Revolution.” We believe that activist digital artmaking is a powerful way to archive, begin to theorize, feel, resist, and co-produce crip knowledge. We also believe that it allows us to dream collectively, emerging through the crisis of COVID-19.<sup>29</sup> Activist digital zine-making opens a new, affective, and aesthetic form of resistance and creative research that calls for “forgetting” ableist capitalist colonialism and Western Enlightenment modes of subjectivity



and knowledge production that target different bodies to exploit, debilitate, maim and/or eliminate.<sup>30</sup> We use the word “forgetting” purposefully, to signal the moments and movements of creative resistance already underway in which alternate possible worlds beyond ableist capitalist colonialism surface. We contend that the zine-making workshop was one such moment; it moved us beyond the objectification and flattening of what it means to be and become human and opened a space and time to thrive together in all of our struggle, beauty, pain, and joy.<sup>31</sup> The zine project was a gesture of hope during crisis that shows “we were here”<sup>32</sup> and it is also a dream for future possibilities infused with crip knowledges (such as humor) and crip spacetimes (such as slowing time down and virtual community making)<sup>33</sup> that have always been here.

## What’s Next for Autistic, Surviving and Thriving?

Eleven of sixteen zine-makers took part in a follow-up initiative, working with arts educator, curator, and critical ally Tara Bursey to create exquisite physical copies of their zines. Collective members also curated an in-person and online zine exhibit that ran at Tangled Art + Disability Gallery in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, September 13–October 21, 2022. The zines in their entirety with image descriptions and artist statements based on this exhibit can be viewed on the Re•Storying Autism website.<sup>34</sup> An open access online module focused on neurodiversity affirming approaches for scholars, educators, high school students and teachers, practitioners, clinicians, and others, using some of the zine art and more, is also underway. In addition, we are co-analyzing interviews and zines as members of the Collective to archive the making practices that provided the conditions of possibility for the cultivation of autistic community and radical access during pandemic times. Images of the printed zines appear below.

On the cover of Mandy Klein’s work (Fig. 14), the juxtaposition of “COVID” and “AUTISM” creates an unsettling effect of confusion and lack of control. The zine was printed not with flipping pages, but as a long accordion fold. This fold style not only displays the heavy impact of the content all at once, but imitates the “unwieldiness” of the autistic author trying to maintain calm routines during COVID. The “neon lights” appearance of the words helps to illustrate the author’s overwhelm: neon lights are a common source of overwhelm for many autistic people. Another visible page has a close-up photo of a sparking flame with text reading, “I want this to be over!” placed over top, suggesting that COVID has been ruinous for the author.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-7.jpg> >

Figure 14. Three photos of *COVID/AUTISM* by Mandy Klein.

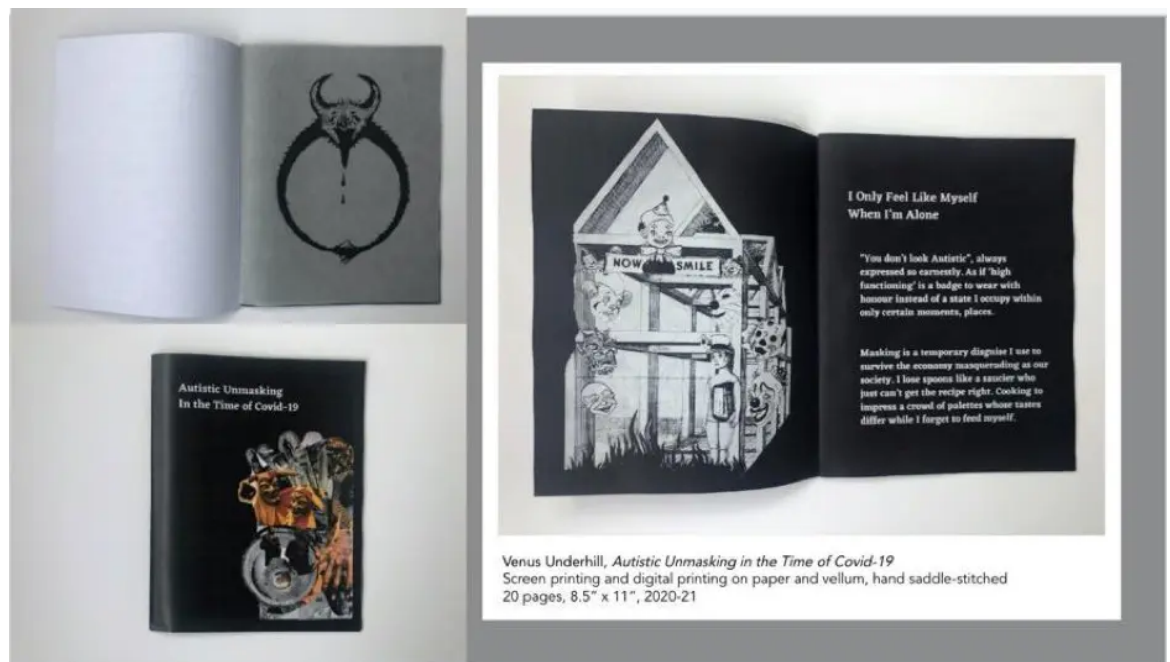
Jennifer Fehr's *Autism in Metaphors* (Fig. 15) includes a dictionary definition of the word "metaphor" on its cover: "Metaphor: An expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object." The text continues on to introduce the zine's concept: "While Autistic people tend to prefer clear, literal language, neurotypicals often use figurative, comparative language. With that in mind, here are some metaphors to help the neurotypical in your life (or perhaps even you) understand the autistic mind." The graph paper background further represents this zine as educational material. On the first page, photos of shoes and the metaphorical phrase, "You can't understand someone unless you've walked in their shoes" is used to introduce the concept of the "double-empathy problem."<sup>35</sup> This concept criticizes the idea that "autistic people lack empathy/understanding" and instead posits that autistic people and allistic people have such different ways of thinking that both groups often struggle to understand the other group's feelings. The second page uses illustrated images of soda pop bottles as a metaphor to explain how meltdowns and shutdowns are like the result of shaking up a pop bottle: stressors build up pressure that must be released somewhere.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-8.jpg> >

Figure 15. Two photos of *Autism in Metaphors* by Jennifer Fehr.

Finally, Venus Underhill's *Autistic Unmasking in the Time of Covid-19* (Fig. 16) uses horror-inspired images. On a black background cover, haunting magazine prints of doll-like, life-size clowns hover between various states of hauntingness, from humanlike and suffering to monstrous and mischievous. Peals of light obscure some of the figures, and further disturbing imagery—insects, a demon's gnarled hand, and pointed horns—curl around the collage. Inside, a two-page spread features hand-drawn illustrations: a series of clown masks are unnervingly arranged around the doorway of a triangular building. Looking closer, readers can see the building is an optical illusion, with panels of wood crossing each other in impossible ways. To the right of the entrance stands a naked person in a top-hat, their torso cut open to reveal the panels behind them; at the top of the entrance hangs a cheery banner. Ignorant of its haunting surroundings, it reads, "Now smile." The right side of the spread features a poem entitled, "I Only Feel Like Myself when I'm Alone."



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-9.jpg> >

Figure 16. *Autistic Unmasking in the Time of Covid-19* by Venus Underhill.

The process we document here—in disability justice activist Mia Mingus' words—"leaves evidence behind" of how we have lived, loved, cared, and resisted during this time of crisis.<sup>36</sup> This evidence also resists the creep of necropolitics, marking some bodies for the "living dead"<sup>37</sup> and others for life exposed during the global health crisis and collectively imagines autistic futures as desirable,<sup>38</sup> fundamental to life together and vital to us all.

## Notes

1. We use the term "neurodivergent" to refer to claimed identities that diverge from and disrupt what is considered neuro-normative. Neurodivergence refers to ways of being identified with labels such as autism, ADHD, brain injury and more. For more on terminology, see Nick Walker, *NEUROQUEER HERESIES: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (Fort Worth, TX: Autonomous Press LLC, 2021), 43–48; and Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). ↩
2. For a more on the Re•Storying project, see the project website: [www.restoryingautism.com](http://www.restoryingautism.com) < <http://www.restoryingautism.com> > . ↩
3. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 22. Also see the disability justice work of [Sins Invalid](https://www.sinsinvalid.org) < <https://www.sinsinvalid.org> > , [Alice Wong and The Disability Visibility Project](https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com) < <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com> > , [Lydia X. Z. Brown](https://www.autistichoya.com) < <https://www.autistichoya.com> > , [Mia Mingus](https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2) < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2> > , and [Syrus Marcus Ware](https://www.syrusmarcusware.com) < <https://www.syrusmarcusware.com> > , among others. ↩
4. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 92. Also see [Lydia X. Z. Brown, "Bearing Witness, Demanding Freedom: Judge Rotenberg Center Living Archive,"](https://autistichoya.net/judge-rotenberg-center) Lydia X. Z. Brown, *Laboring for Disability Justice & Liberation*, July 15, 2021, <https://autistichoya.net/judge-rotenberg-center> < <https://autistichoya.net/judge-rotenberg-center> > ; Margaret Gibson and Patricia Douglas, "Disturbing Behaviours: Ole Ivar Lovaas and the

- Queer History of Autism Science," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 4, no. 2 (2008): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v4i2.29579> < <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v4i2.29579>>. ↵
5. For more on autism tropes and the implication of mothers see Patricia Douglas, "'As If You Had a Choice': Autism Mothers and the Remaking of the Human," *Health, Culture and Society* 5, no. 1 (2013): 167–181. ↵
  6. For more information on (re)storying/authoring autism see Patricia Douglas, Carla Rice, Katherine Runswick-Cole, Steacy Easton, Margaret Gibson, Julia Gruson-Wood, Estée Klar, and Raya Shields, "Re-storying Autism: A Body Becoming Disability Studies in Education Approach," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 25 no. 5 (2021): 605–622; Re-Storying Autism Writing Collective (Raya Shields, Steacy Easton, Julia Gruson-Wood, Margaret F. Gibson, Patty N. Douglas, and Carla M. Rice), "Storytelling Methods on the Move," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (online 20 April, 2022): <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1563835> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1563835>>; and Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). ↵
  7. See, for example, Leah Harper, "From Ecocore to Hot Hot Hot: The Thriving Market for Sustainable Zines," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2019/apr/26/from-ecocore-to-hot-hot-hot-the-thriving-market-for-sustainable-zines>. ↵
  8. Bridget Liang, "Divided Communities and Absent Voices: The Search for Autistic BIPOC Blogs," *Studies in Social Justice* 16, no. 2 (2022): 447–469. ↵
  9. For more about the zine-making workshop and resources created on online accessibility, see <https://www.restoryingautism.com/collective> < <https://www.restoryingautism.com/collective>>. ↵
  10. See, for example, the Tangled Art + Disability website, <https://tangledarts.org> < <https://tangledarts.org>>. ↵
  11. See Andrea LaMarre, Carla Rice, and Kayla Besse, "Relaxed Performance: Exploring Accessibility in the Canadian Theatre Landscape" (Online report prepared for British Council Canada, 2019), 1–86, <https://bodiesintranslation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Relaxed-Performance-Full-Length-Report-Digital.pdf> < <https://bodiesintranslation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Relaxed-Performance-Full-Length-Report-Digital.pdf>>. ↵
  12. Jesse Stommel, Chirs Friend, and Sean Michael Morris, "Introduction: The Urgency of Critical Digital Pedagogy," in *Critical Digital Pedagogy*, ed. Jesse Stommel, Chirs Friend, and Michael Morris (Washington, D.C: Hybrid Pedagogy Inc.), 4. ↵
  13. See [www.restoryingautism.com/collective](http://www.restoryingautism.com/collective) < <http://www.restoryingautism.com/collective>> for the complete guide. ↵
  14. You can view this guide in its entirety here: [www.restoryingautism.com/collective](http://www.restoryingautism.com/collective) < <http://www.restoryingautism.com/collective>>. ↵
  15. On access frictions see Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, "Crip Technoscience Manifesto," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1–33. ↵
  16. For more on the concept of access doulas, a phenomenon that emerges from the work of Keith Gotkins and others in the disability justice and crip rave movement, see <https://blackflash.ca/2021/09/14/access-magicians-in-cyberspace-care-as-a-festive-practice/> < <https://blackflash.ca/2021/09/14/access-magicians-in-cyberspace-care-as-a-festive-practice/>>. ↵
  17. On holding space as a critical ally, see L. Simpson, *As We have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). ↵
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# Author Information



## The Re•Storying Autism Collective

Re•Storying Autism in Education (2019–2023) is a multimedia story making project that brings together Autistic people, family members, educators, practitioners, and artists to rethink inclusion in ways that desire the difference of Autism. The overall aim of the Re•Storying Autism project is to transform deficit understandings of Autism in education and create new approaches that centre the perspectives of Autistic people and their/our supporters. The project holds in-person and online storytelling workshops and events in Ontario, Manitoba, Canada, Aotearoa, and England. The Collective, made up of Autistic people and critical allies, is an arts and research collective that meets monthly to plan initiatives and events. Re•Storying Autism is funded in part by the SSHRC Insight Grant 435-2019-0129.

[View all of The Re•Storying Autism Collective's articles.](#)



## Sherri Liska

Sherri Liska is a Toronto-based neurodiversity activist, carbohydrate enthusiast, and (most importantly) cat lady. She works as an independent, AuDHD neurodiversity consultant through [www.freelydivergent.com](http://www.freelydivergent.com). In her professional life, you can find her co-developing and advising on neurodiversity-friendly workshops, support spaces, accessibility policies, and approaches to education. In her personal life, you can find her comparing bakeries and chasing after foster cats who are trying to eat plastic. Sherri values and commits to a warm, non-judgmental, and collaborative approach in all of her work. As a peer supporter, she gently accompanies her autistic peers through the process of de-pathologizing their ways of being and towards feeling “at home” in their identities. In her one-on-one consultations with families, she employs her knowledge of autistic needs, mannerisms, history, and politics, as well as her own experiences as an “unseen” disabled person, to help non-autistic people better connect to their autistic loved ones.

[View all of Sherri Liska's articles.](#)



## Kat Singer

Kat Singer is a multiply neurodivergent interdisciplinary artist, scholar, facilitator, activist, and mental health professional residing in Toronto. Their



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[View all of Kat Singer's articles.](#)



## Emily Gillespie

Emily Gillespie is a mad and autistic author, disability activist, and professional daydreamer. They have an MA in Critical Disability Studies and love dreaming about accessibility. They have published one novel and several short stories and poems. They have volunteered and worked in the disability community as an activist, researcher, and facilitator for over ten years. When not writing and working, Emily can be found curled up in her bed full of unicorn plushies dreaming of a more just and loving world for all marginalized and disabled folks.

[View all of Emily Gillespie's articles.](#)



## Sheryl Peters

Sheryl Peters is the Project Coordinator for Re•Storying Autism. She is a Winnipeg-based social researcher, documentary filmmaker and artist. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts and a Master's degree in Sociology. Her research work focuses on social equity, health, and well-being of women and older adults, person-centred health care, and decolonizing/anti-oppressive research methods.

[View all of Sheryl Peters's articles.](#)



## Patty Douglas

Patty Douglas is an Associate Professor of Disability Studies and Inclusive Education at Brandon University. Her research focuses on transforming deficit approaches to disability and difference in education and health. She uses critical and creative approaches including disability studies, critical autism studies, mad mothering and arts-based methodologies. Douglas leads Re•Storying Autism, a research creation project that reimagines social and educational practice, in ways that affirm difference. She identifies as neurodivergent and invisibly disabled, and is a former special education teacher and the (m)other of two neurodivergent sons, one of whom is autistic.

[View all of Patty Douglas's articles.](#)

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## Coalition-In-Progress: Found Poetry Through Phone Calls with People Labelled/With Intellectual Disability During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Erin Kuri, Antoinette, A. K., Bill Chase, Cindy Scott, Doreen Kalifer, Harold George Dougall, Kevin John Head, Marie, Nicholas Herd, P. A. I., P. S., R., Sean Simone, Chelsea Temple Jones and Ann Fudge Schormans | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** For institutional survivors and their younger peers labelled/with intellectual disability, the COVID-19 pandemic and its related lockdowns carry over past experiences under government-directed isolation and mandatory medical interventions. The sudden convergence of past and present necropolitical ableism in labeled persons' lives colours this crisis, as we—a group of survivors, younger labeled people (who have not lived in institutions), and researcher/allies—attempt to simply stay in touch amid digital divides that cut off our once vibrant, interdependent in-person activities. No longer able to gather, and with limited Internet (or no) access, we resist social abandonment through phone calls. During phone conversations we discuss the affective contours of this time: grief over the past, loss of agency, restrictive rules in group homes, the dynamics of protest, fear sparked by public health orders, and a mix of anxiety and hope about the future. Taking this telephone-based dialogue as evidence of our lives in these times, we present a brief body of collectively written found poetry, a form of poetic inquiry composed of phone call snippets. This piece, coauthored by twenty members of the “DiStory: Disability Then and Now” project in Toronto, Canada, offers a snapshot of coalition-in-process, keeping in touch amid a crisis that threatens our togetherness and—for some more than others—our lives. Following Braidotti, we couch this found poetry in a brief commentary on our slow, in-progress attempt to “co-construct a different platform of becoming” with one another amid a divergence of historical and contemporary inequities.

**KEYWORDS** disability, justice, poetry, COVID-19, ableism

*Note: Each of the authors of this paper made their own decision as to whether to use their full name, first name only, or initials.*

## Introduction

This found poetry offers snapshots of the ways in which a group of individuals labelled/with intellectual disabilities—some of whom identify as institutional survivors and some identifying as members of a younger generation of people who have not lived in institutions—and researcher/allies, keep in touch via phone calls during a global pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns in Toronto, Canada. This collaborative writing speaks to some of the complex affective ways that we, as a group, experience coalition-building-in-progress in ableist, high tech cultures and under lockdown.<sup>1</sup> While digital mediation was a viable coalition-building tool for some folks at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people in our group live without access to digital worlds. For us, coalition-building is an ongoing process operating on a low-tech plane; we connect through telephone calls. The writing below is grouped through four themes that emerged in our found poetry writing process: attempts to simply stay in touch amid digital divides during especially isolating times, resistance to social abandonment, the uncanny experience of a sudden convergence of past and present necropolitical ableism, and an attempt to “co-construct different platforms of becoming.”<sup>2</sup> Taking this telephone-based dialogue as “evidence” of our lives in these times that might be, and make us, “recognizable” to one another,<sup>3</sup> the poetry below chronicles the “DiStory” group’s coalition-in-progress efforts to keep in touch amid a crisis that threatens our together-ness and—for some more than others—our lives.

## Background

Our group, called “DiStory” (a mash-up of the words “disability,” “story,” and “history”) took shape through a series of in-person meet-ups beginning in 2017. Participating in these gatherings were coresearchers labelled/with intellectual disabilities, non-labelled academic and community-based coresearchers and research assistants, and non-labelled arts facilitators.<sup>4</sup> The focus was on learning from people labelled/with intellectual disabilities, including survivors of Ontario’s Regional Centres—large-scale provincial institutions, the last of which closed in 2009 but whose legacy of institutionalized care, discrimination, and ableism live on in the day-to-day experiences of both survivors and younger people labelled/with intellectual disabilities.<sup>5</sup> This learning informed the collaborative determination of the purpose of our project: our collective creation of learning materials for post-secondary students. This decision reflected labelled coresearchers’ concerns that the day-to-day experiences, needs, and desires of people labelled/with intellectual disabilities

remain largely invisible to most people. Combined with their worry that the closure of Ontario's large-scale institutions was leading to a misguided belief that everything was now "OK," and that discrimination, exclusion, and violence were no longer an issue for people labelled/with intellectual disabilities, they turned their sights towards the education of young people who they understood to have the power to shape a better future.

The COVID-19 pandemic called on us to reimagine our engagement with each other at the onset of regional lockdowns. Although it is widely understood that lockdowns are designed to keep us safe from contracting coronavirus, the abrupt halt to in-person gatherings (that once served as a lifeline for community engagement with the arts, activism, and other forms of organizing) felt alarmingly familiar to many labelled "DiStory" members: social restrictions starkly echoed the trauma of past experiences in institutionalization designed with eugenic thought to separate the populous from a perceived threat of disability. And, problematically, for many "DiStory" group members living without access to Internet or communication technologies such as computers, government-ordered social cut-offs that began in early 2020 and continue today cannot be supplemented through digital communications and remain isolating.

## Process and Method

To resist isolation, we connect through telephone conversations. Though it may take a few tries, it is possible to reach "DiStory" members via phone calls if they are living alone or in group homes and other shared living spaces. For all "DiStory" members, maintaining our connections in conditions of (often extreme) isolation is essential. Both labelled and non-labelled coresearchers also desire to keep the project moving. Being less able to adapt previously planned project activities to this new way of working, together we turned our attention to the necessity of speaking out and against the invisibility of people labelled/with intellectual disabilities in pandemic planning and responses.

At two different points in time (summer 2020 and fall 2021) Erin Kuri, a non-labelled coauthor, engaged each labelled coresearcher in audio-recorded conversations about their pandemic experiences, thoughts, worries, fears, and hopes; about what they have been doing individually and collectively; and about what they want non-labelled others—especially governments—to know, and consequently, to do.

Two years and a great many phone calls later, coauthors of this paper (a mix of labelled and non-labelled coresearchers) scribed a series of found poems based on transcripts from these audio-recorded conversations.

Working with all the transcripts, Kuri identified four emergent themes and created a document linking themes with transcript fragments reflective of each theme. Engaging then in numerous one-on-one telephone conversations with labelled co-authors, the meanings of and connections between fragments became clear. Non-labelled co-authors (Kuri, Fudge Schormans, Jones) collaborated to format each poem to reflect these meanings and connections, and the emotions within each, to reveal labelled coauthors' lived experience,<sup>6</sup> with Kuri sharing these constructions with labelled co-authors and inviting feedback via phone calls. Poems were reconstructed in response to feedback and shared once again. Through this process, fragments were care-fully assembled into the poems we share here. The poems then are the words of labelled group members. Jointly crafted by labelled and non-labelled coauthors, each poem is composed of the words of multiple labelled group members, with some degree of influence from non-labelled coauthors—an interlacing that draws out the affective contours of the conversations and the fragments.

Our found poetry is influenced by postmodern feminist approaches to knowledge building that value intersectionality, collaborative egalitarian ways of working, ethics of care, and reflexive praxis. These values guided decisions made with respect to processes and outcomes of the research. Throughout the “Distory” project, Kuri had been engaged in regular communication with labelled coauthors, forming familiar working relationships built on respect, empathy, trust, reliability, and mutual passion towards social justice aims of the group. These relational ties were foundational to engaging in our found poetry research methodology, supporting labelled authors to feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives.

While such relationships are necessary for this kind of collaborative work, our attunement and care to relational dynamics included recognition of how labelled authors may rely more on non-labelled authors. Labelled authors relied on the relationship with Kuri to be able to participate in the project. As well, they relied on non-labelled authors to represent their experiences and perspectives in a way that avoided pathologizing, victimizing, or infantilizing them. For non-labelled authors, a great deal of trust therefore is placed in their hands to prioritize the best interests of those most marginalized in the group. As a means of attuning to matters of dependency, Kuri engaged in practices of ongoing written and verbal informed consent. She paid particular attention to ensuring, as much as possible, that labelled group members understood that their relationship with her and their participation in the project would not be negatively impacted by any dissenting opinions they had about the writing or decisions they made with respect to inclusions or exclusions of any part of their transcript material. Overall, when Kuri shared the constructed poems with labelled authors, they articulated appreciation for how their words and ideas were included, some added suggestions, and all expressed pleasure with the final poems.

We draw on found poetry as a form of research—as both representation and analysis, a means by which to learn and ethically re-present labelled co-authors’ experiences and thoughts.<sup>7</sup> In consideration of their marginalization as “knowers,” we also understand found poetry research as pushing back, as resistance to their long-standing invisibility and silencing—an invisibility that has had significant consequences in terms of pandemic planning and responses.<sup>8</sup>

As a form of poetic inquiry, the research method of found poetry involves one or more researchers creating poetry in a collaborative and relational manner by selecting exact words, or phrases from materials such as interview transcripts, field notes, email discourse, texts or literature. These elements are then cut and pasted together, attending to spacing and line breaks, revealing the essence of labelled coauthors’ lived experience. Found poetry is an accessible way of imaginatively and intertextually reconstructing already-existing texts which, in our case, were phone call transcripts.<sup>9</sup> Although the term “found” may imply lack of intention, accountability of researchers to those they collaborate with is central to interpretively transforming words and phrases located within the transcripts into poetic form. Through this transformative and collaborative process, lived experience of those most marginalized may be holistically represented with an aim to preserve and evoke affect. The emphasis on affect makes vicarious participation (showing instead of simply telling) accessible to a broad audience, thereby evoking empathy and creating potential for learning and positive change. Through collaborative back-and-forth exchanges, striking passages were selected and clustered into thematic groups. Essential words, phrases, pauses and silences from transcripts were then reconstructed into what Rosi Braidotti terms “fragments of meditation upon the sorrowful present” of the pandemic, upon its roots in the past, and worries—and hopes—for the future.<sup>10</sup> The affective contours of these found poems based on phone conversations—that is, the emotive and political intensities colouring our chats that make us *feel* something<sup>11</sup>—point to grief over the past, loss of agency, restrictive rules in group homes, the dynamics of protest, fear sparked by public health orders, and a mix of anxiety and hope about the future. Found poetry’s capacity for communicating these affects and expanding perspectives is always partial and in-progress because they are open to interpretation, and thereby also open to misinterpretation.<sup>12</sup> As Braidotti points out in her discussion of ethical inquiry amid crises, “Words, in so many ways, falter and fail.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, these poems are a bricolage of our attempts to share a complex, sometimes un-articulate evidence of becoming coalition-in-progress in pandemic times.

# Reflection

Our poems explain why we think of ourselves as becoming coalition-in-progress. Early on in our work together, in-person pre-pandemic meetups supported coalition-building amongst “DiStory” group members, an emerging intergenerational coalition of individuals with and without the label of “intellectual disability,” and/or other disability labels or identifications. The enforced shift to virtual engagement at the onset of COVID-19 worked to exclude many “DiStory” members, interrupting project work of engagement, sharing, and learning—of becoming coalition. Here, following Braidotti, we recognize that we are going through an “extraordinary period” of high-tech cognitive capitalism that contributes to pandemic conditions in the first place.<sup>14</sup> The increased use of technology and digital interventions that supported many groups at the height of COVID-19’s impact was inaccessible to us. For some folks labelled/with intellectual disabilities, access to high-tech connectivity is impossible and this exclusion represents one characteristic of what Shayda Kafai terms nondisabled supremacy.<sup>15</sup> Excluded, ignored, not-considered in pandemic planning and responses, “DiStory” group members labelled/with intellectual disabilities are those about whom Patty Berne voices concern, over when she explains that “during the pandemic, eugenic practices increased and no alarms were sounded.”<sup>16</sup> Sidelined at the low-tech side of a complex digital divide during a time of crisis, our coalition-building remains in progress. In this context, the telephone comes to signify possibility, an unanticipated platform by which to connect, carry on with the work. Co-constructing found poetry—via telephone—further facilitates becoming coalition. While in many ways a lifeline, these platforms cannot replicate that which was possible in-person. We are not able to launch more radical coalition-building—cross disability and/or cross-movement coalition building—or to more actively advocate for change because, as the poems below demonstrate, we are preoccupied with oppression and survival.

Between the lines of these poems is evidence of necropolitical, trauma-inducing policies that threaten the lives of our group members, including the pairing of Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) legislation in Canada known as Bill C-7<sup>17</sup> and clinical triage protocols that, as disabled self-advocates argue, deprioritizes disabled people.<sup>18</sup> Amid this necropolitical context, perhaps it is fair to say that we are “in-progress” rather than a more sharply defined coalition because some more than others in the “DiStory” group are still grappling with threats to their lives brought on by COVID-19 policy responses.

In other words, these poems are not intended to symbolize a successful overcoming of pandemic times. Rather, they are an affective glimpse into a historical moment wherein labelled people struggle to stay in touch, resist social abandonment, navigate necropolitical ableism, and—through it all—leave evidence of their lives and what they are becoming in this time.<sup>19</sup>



# Staying in Touch<sup>20</sup>

1.

a lot of people feel  
more isolated and lonely  
since they can't hug anybody  
I miss seeing people  
being around people is important  
you must have somebody with you  
to understand you

I don't have the computer  
I can't afford the internet  
The only computer in the house  
is in the staff office  
we can't go to the library and use the computers  
and internet to Google COVID-19  
I can't go out and use a free computer

sometimes it's way different  
sometimes it works  
and sometimes it doesn't work  
I don't think the virtual is the same thing  
I never used it before  
and it's been a big adjustment

2.

I live in a group home  
I only get 25 minutes to go out  
I can sit outside  
but who wants to sit outside in the cold?  
I have to shower when I come back  
the staff don't want their kids to get sick

My family doctor  
never calls me  
all I know is that I got my doses  
that's all that really matters  
a vaccine is a vaccine, you know

either you know what you're talking about  
or don't talk about it

I still take care of the animals  
I cannot stand to clean the cat litter  
but I'm going to have to do it  
I wish COVID was over right now  
do you wish that, too?

3.

I don't think that their response  
has included people with disabilities  
they intentionally don't care

## Resisting social abandonment<sup>21</sup>

1.

I do talk on the phone  
I would say talking on the phone is positive  
I get some communication  
we all deserve  
to be alive  
to belong

2.

I was still able to keep in touch  
with people  
so we were keeping  
some form of contact  
over the phone

3.

I miss going to the bank  
and I need to do it  
over the phone

I learn networking  
that was a survival skill  
because I could network  
how to get things

he said to call  
whenever  
and I can phone her  
if I need anything

4.

I think that isolation is worse  
it's more unhealthy than anything else  
that's what I believe.

I can't imagine.  
I can't go out.  
I want people.

COVID19 affects me.  
We're still staying home.

5.

what's the government doing  
for us?  
it affects me  
we have to do something about it  
the government  
has to do something about it

we can share it by talking about it

we call ourselves survivors

we're part of the community as well

call me  
on the phone.

# Past and Present Convergence<sup>22</sup>

1.

It was kind of lonely

very eerie

it was creepy.

You would never usually see

Toronto like that

a ghost town.

2.

Some people with disabilities  
have also experienced

so

much

trauma.

It's made my life

so

damn

hard.

It's the same thing like at the institution

I don't think about how I feel.

You have to live with it

and learn to be strong.

3.

It should've never happened.

The government  
should have never

let it  
happen.

4.

but everyone accepts what they have  
they don't go out anyways  
I've been living alone for 10 years

I sit by myself  
I look for the single seat

I sit by myself  
I stay home, I save lives.

I sit by myself  
stay home

I sit by myself  
save lives.

I sit by myself

That's what we have to do.

5.

We live in persecution  
*it's an infringement on our freedom*

all the support workers tell us  
*that we are conspiracy theorists*

Just be careful of your surroundings  
*Those who are more vulnerable*

It always is harder because of their disabilities  
*it's hard to trust anybody*

because of the way they treated us

*in the past . . .*

# Becoming<sup>23</sup>

1.

Doug Ford,<sup>24</sup> forget it  
He's only for the rich people  
the top brass  
they keep turning up the heat  
He doesn't give a damn  
for the nursing homes  
That Doug Ford,  
the son of a gun,  
he should tell people before it ever happens again

2.

things are changing because of the virus

*and it's a totally different way  
everything's changed*

I'm sitting in the house all the time

*and it doesn't feel the same  
at all*

*it's changed a lot . . .*

*it's changed for everyone*

3.

I don't think it's remained the same . . .  
it's kind of in-between  
positive and negative

except that it's been boring  
it was kind of the same  
and kind of not the same.

I was kind of getting used to it  
and I was kind of not

it's just going to take a longer time  
to jump back again.

4.

I just let things come and go  
it's different than it was before  
COVID is not finished yet  
it depends where you live  
I don't know if everybody  
had the same experience  
as me

5.

what I want to know is,  
when it's going to end?  
I just wish everything was open  
and I hope they come out with the vaccine  
this year if possible  
they were too slow in responding  
to the outbreak

6.

I don't know what to believe

I have been watching news  
about vaccines and the numbers  
going up and down  
I can't understand

You should be able to believe

why they allow cannabis stores  
where they blow smoke in the air  
if they're so worried about germs

What you want to believe

You might end up calling me a conspiracy  
theorist

they think there is a device in the vaccine  
it's a bunch of baloney

And not what they tell you to believe

but there's not much  
I can do about it  
I just want the truth

7.

where's the housing they promised?

my worker, is she my parent?  
she's not, right?

We have to stay for so long  
until this is over, right?

I wish it was back to normal

it's gonna blow over.

I have air in my lungs.  
the positive thing is that I'm still alive

that's all that matters

that's all that matters, right?

the answer to that is  
I have no idea

8.

don't mind me  
I'm mixing some psyllium and flax to add to  
bread

look how it spoiled  
our programs  
what we were planning to do . . .  
people with intellectual disabilities  
*need to be recognized*

I still take care of the animals.  
I still deliver papers on Thursday mornings  
thank God I can be home to crochet and  
knit  
now I've got a mixture of flax seed and  
psyllium



I try coping strategies the best I can  
I can cope with changes.

for bread making!!

when I'm feeling down or something  
I colour

You get to learn  
things about yourself  
that You maybe  
didn't know

or things that You thought  
You couldn't do

I get to talk about more of how I'm feeling  
I get to share more

Everyone  
is supposed to be

included

the world is changing too  
things need to be changed.  
that's up to God when I go . . .  
not you . . .

and you're not taking my life  
we all deserve to be alive

to belong . . .

I think one day it's going to change  
understand *what we are going through*

I still think it should be  
a choice

I wish people could stick together

I think we're better aware of it  
education has to happen  
take feedback

now!

she stood up for me  
I'd like to see people

getting out of the house  
going to the park  
find your freedom  
reconnect with your freedom

I have reconnected to my freedom

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  20. While lockdowns impacted everyone, adults labelled/with intellectual disabilities, particularly those living in group homes or independent living settings operated by the provincial developmental service sector, experienced especially stringent and long-lasting isolation protocols and visitation bans. Contact with family members, friends, support workers and others has been, for many, almost non-existent. Engagement in day programs and employment was typically prohibited. Without appropriate supports, participation in adult education programs was made more difficult by the move to virtual education. Isolation was further exacerbated as many (including most of the labelled co-researchers) also lacked access to computer technology. ↵
  21. While recognizing how their experiences, support needs, and ideas are too often not considered, even by the broader disability community, during the pandemic, many people labelled/with intellectual disabilities understand themselves to be "the left behind of the left behind" (84). Staying connected, speaking out, networking become essential—necessary for survival. Ann Fudge Schormans, Sue Hutton, Marissa Blake, Kory Earle, and Kevin John Head., "Social Isolation Continued: Covid-19 Shines a Light on What Self-Advocates Know Too Well," *Qualitative Social Work* 20, no. 1–2 (2021): 83–89. ↵
  22. The power and tenacity of the legacy of institutionalization was readily apparent in the impact of pandemic isolation protocols on group members labelled/with intellectual disabilities and labelled people as a group, particularly those living in developmental service residential placements. For survivors, isolation and feelings of abandonment during the pandemic were reminiscent of past experiences of institutionalization. For younger members, they were a painful reminder of ongoing experiences of exclusion and social devaluation common to many people labelled/with intellectual disabilities. ↵
  23. Without exception, labelled group members want the pandemic to end. Throughout they have experienced what Braidotti describes as "complex and internally contradictory alternation of emotions. . . . An intense sense of suffering alternating with hope, fear unfolding alongside resilience, boredom merging into vulnerability" (465), and this is reflected in this poem. While desiring an end to the pandemic, they have also made plain that "a return to 'normal' is to be resisted—'normal' has not worked in the past, has proven harmful, and will not be any better in the future" (Fudge Schormans, et al. "Social Isolation Continued," 88). Recognizing the pandemic's disruptive impact on the world, on "normal" ways of being and doing, their own lives and sense of themselves, they also point to how, if recognized as such by non-labelled others, this moment is an opportunity for things to change for the better for people labelled/with intellectual disabilities. ↵

24. Doug Ford is, at the time of this writing, the premier of the province of Ontario, Canada where the "DiStory" project members live, and thus bears some responsibility for the policies and practices enacted during the pandemic. ↩
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# Author Information

## Erin Kuri

Erin Kuri is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work and a PhD student in the Department of Gender Studies and Feminist Research. She has over a decade of clinical experience as an advocate and psychotherapist specializing in art therapy and trauma, primarily working in the areas of child welfare, gender-based violence, and maternal and infant mental health. Erin draws on interdisciplinary feminisms, ethics, critical disability studies, motherhood studies, and trauma theory to develop collaborative and arts-based approaches to knowledge building. Her SSHRC-funded doctoral research explores how young mothers make meaning of the concept of support within the context of service provision.

[View all of Erin Kuri's articles.](#)

## Antoinette

I am a friendly person. I volunteer and visit with people. Under COVID, I can't do that anymore, so I crochet blankets at home to give to people. I am doing this project because I want people to know our story and what happened to us. I think it's good that we're telling our stories. I think it's good to let people hear what happened to everybody in their life. You have to be nice to everybody. It's the way you feel in your heart, to give it back.

[View all of Antoinette's articles.](#)

## A. K.

A.K. completed a two-year program at North Humber College. He is currently employed with a courier company called A-Way Express. A.K. is an avid biography reader. He lives in an apartment in downtown Toronto, Ontario.

[View all of A. K.'s articles.](#)

## Bill Chase

I am a survivor of physical, mental, and psychological abuse that I experienced during my years in the Huronia Regional Centre. I am doing this project because I am a former patient at Huronia, which used to be the Ontario School of Orillia

in the 1950s. I want to let people know what former patients had to go through during their years in this institution. People need to know what everyone had to go through during their time growing up inside of an institution. I want there to be a better understanding of it.

[View all of Bill Chase's articles.](#)

## Cindy Scott

Cindy Scott is a survivor of Huronia Regional Centre, and a strong advocate for survivors. She is actively involved in Remember Every Name and their work to make sure the names of people buried at Huronia in unmarked graves become known.

[View all of Cindy Scott's articles.](#)

## Doreen Kalifer

I am person that believes in justice and fairness. I believe that people are special in their own way. I like being part of the DiStory group because I fight for the justice of people not being bullied because they are different. I want people to have a better understanding of people with disabilities and for people described as different to have better rights, and for more knowledge spread out to the universe about these things. I write poetry about justice and bullying because this has always been a cause for me.

[View all of Doreen Kalifer's articles.](#)

## Harold George Dougall

I am a survivor of the Huronia Regional Centre. I am 74 years old. I am living in a community in Simcoe North, Ontario, Canada. I am living on my own. I have a cat. I am interested in being involved in politics in my community. I like to teach people about the history of what I went through.

[View all of Harold George Dougall's articles.](#)

## Kevin John Head

Kevin John Head is a self-advocate who recognizes the importance of educating non-disabled people in order to work towards change. Kevin has been a co-researcher on a number of projects. He believes it is important to

share information about these projects with different audiences, in different ways.

[View all of Kevin John Head's articles.](#)

## Marie

I am a human being with rights. I am doing this project because I want people to know that what they did in the institution was wrong, so that they won't do it again. I would like to see changes made so that people with disabilities are more respected, listened to, and believed.

[View all of Marie's articles.](#)

## Nicholas Herd

I am an actor, performer, and talk show host. I want to see the whole world know about people with disabilities and their stories. I am doing this project so that people can understand how everyone is different. Some of us are advocates fighting for people with other disabilities. I want to see people think about how we can shape our world, where everybody can belong, and each of us is part of all of us. I want people to learn how we can contribute from many different parts of who we are and how we can express ourselves in different ways. Everybody is different and we need to celebrate difference.

[View all of Nicholas Herd's articles.](#)

## P. A. I.

She would like to one day go to college to learn how to work with children with disabilities.

[View all of P. A. I.'s articles.](#)

## P. S.

[View all of P. S.'s articles.](#)

R.

[View all of R.'s articles.](#)

## Sean Simone

I live in a group home in a city. My parents got an Order of Canada. I have been working with the DiStory group.

[View all of Sean Simone's articles.](#)

## Chelsea Temple Jones

Chelsea Temple Jones is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University. A queer, white settler spoonie, Dr. Jones holds a Ph.D. in Communication and Culture from X and York Universities and an MA in Critical Disability Studies from York University. She completed a Mitacs postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Regina's Vocally Oriented Investigations of Create Expression (VOICE) Lab—a studio space for disabled folx who communicate in various ways, and not always through speech. A member of the DiStory project, she also holds a SSHRC Insight Development Grant that continues her study of the ways in which ableist, colonial gestures of "giving voice" face resistance from young, disabled adults engaged in disability justice.

[View all of Chelsea Temple Jones's articles.](#)

## [Ann Fudge Schormans](#)

Ann Fudge Schormans is a Professor in the School of Social Work at McMaster University. A white, cisgender settler, Dr. Fudge Schormans' long history of engagement with people labeled/with intellectual disabilities through social work practice and research, combined with ongoing activist work informs her teaching and research. Employing inclusive, co-researcher methodologies and knowledge production, arts-informed methods, and writing with disabled co-researchers current research projects include the DiStory project that is co-developing curriculum materials for post-secondary education with survivors of Ontario's institutions and younger generations of people labeled/with intellectual disability; Partnering for Change, which attends to the intersection of disability and youth homelessness; Mobilizing Critical Disability Studies



(CDS) Scholarship in non-CDS Spaces; and projects focused on intimate citizenship for people labeled/with intellectual disabilities.

[View all of Ann Fudge Schormans's articles.](#)

## Article details

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<https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.9>

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## A Dialogue and Reflection about the Masks for Crips Project

by Alison Kopit and Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** Masks for Crips was a mutual aid project that centered the Chicago disability community. Alison Kopit and Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi began the project at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it ran from March 2020 through July 2020. Early in the pandemic, when personal protective equipment (PPE) was difficult to come by and the state was not caring for those most impacted by the pandemic—disabled people, essential workers, people living in congregate facilities, and unhoused people, to name a few—the project provided homemade masks to disabled people and their care teams in the Chicagoland area. Masks for Crips addressed an infrastructural gap and disability community need in an urgent way, and provided information about how to use and care for masks, as well as best practices for reducing risk surrounding COVID-19. The project was born through text message-based conversation in March 2020 as Alison and Sandie held space for each other by sending memes, texts, and support informally. From those moments of connection, they proceeded to expand outward and develop a mutual aid project that delivered about 300 masks, start to finish. The project brought together delivery and mask-making volunteers while serving as a means of connection and an expression of disabled care during an isolating time.

**KEYWORDS** art, disability, mutual aid, mask

## Background

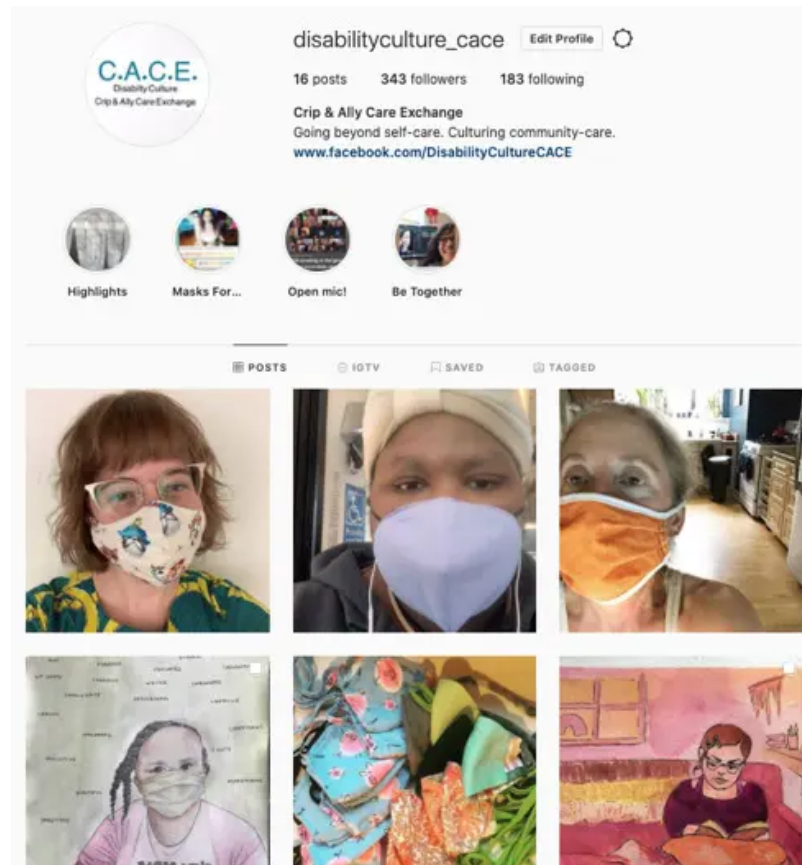
For this reflection for *Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry*, we staged a dialogue over Zoom to reflect on the Masks for Crips project. Our hope was that engaging in a more informal dialogue would be an accessible way to introduce the reader to our shared practice and collaboration dynamic. Prior to the conversation, we developed questions that we thought would highlight some important aspects of the project. While this project may have appeared similar to other mask projects that emerged during the pandemic, we wanted to use these questions to illuminate some of the unique crip sensibilities and practices that we imbued into this work, and to create opportunities to discuss the ways that care, access,

and disability justice were integral to the project.<sup>1</sup> When we met virtually for the conversation, we allowed the conversation to unfold organically, each of us sharing memories and reflections that addressed the questions, and allowing other questions to emerge as well. Over the course of the conversation, we realized that many of our memories from the early pandemic were blurry, and that we were uncertain about some of the dates and the order of the events that took place. However, engaging in this conversation allowed us to further care for each other as we worked together to fill in these blanks. As we reflected, we resurfaced memory while also acknowledging that a part of a crip process is being ok with not remembering perfectly. With this in mind, we acknowledge that this is a partial reflection—a snapshot of a moment in time that we want to document to honor the ways that disabled people help each other survive.

## Conversation

**What was Masks for Crips to you and why does it matter (both on an individual and collective level)?**

**Sandie:** At the beginning of the pandemic, I was in the mid semester teaching a Fieldwork class to graduate art therapy students in the art therapy and counseling department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My art therapist colleague, Katharine Houpt and I initiated a temporary platform on Instagram and Facebook called, “Crip & Ally Care Exchange” for students and disability community members to team up as art-making buddies over Zoom or Google Meet. This platform matched participants and provided ideas for them to make art. For example, one person could rest comfortably, engage in household chores or talk while eating dinner or reading a book, then the other person creates art based on the conversation. They could also create art about each other. The purpose of this exchange was to create an opportunity for companionship and to explore ways to document the human connections during the initial quarantine in the city of Chicago. Participants were invited to share images of their work on our Instagram and Facebook. As the semester came to an end, more mutual aid groups began to emerge in the city. The Crip & Ally Care Exchange platform remained open, but instead of organizing art-making buddies, it was available to support other initiatives, such as Masks for Crips.



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IMAGE-1-masks-for-Crips-A-Kopit.jpg>

Figure 1. A screenshot of the Crip & Ally Care Exchange [https://www.instagram.com/disabilityculture\\_cace](https://www.instagram.com/disabilityculture_cace) Instagram account.

Masks for Crips started with shared conversation—sending each other memes and pictures that people were circulating about mask-wearing. We were creating a space for the two of us to vent and make sense of the moment and think through what we could do. Before we figured out what that “something” was, the text messages were a form of being in community with each other from a distance during isolation. It was a place for us to say “Look at this!!!” [in frustration] and also to try and bring some humor into this difficult situation. As we made attempts to contribute or help our friends’ well-being, our communication exchange became a way for us to survive together by being creative while acknowledging each of our capacities to be of service. We were honest about the limitations of the project—we did not want to make anything big and we weren’t thinking this project would apply to EVERYONE. The beauty of it was that we got to practice what it means to center access needs and live into the disability justice principle of collective access. We weren’t trying to operate from a capitalist mindset.

**Alison:** For me, this project was a way of staying in touch with other disabled people during an isolating and scary time. It was a mutual aid project that tried to fill gaps and address the

needs that were not fulfilled by the government or other mask-making projects that surfaced at the onset of the pandemic. Masks for Crips was a way of reaching out to disabled people in Chicago and letting them know that they were not forgotten. And in creating that space, we created a home and practice space for disability justice. It was a space for blending artwork and activism.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IMAGE-2-masks-for-crips-A-Kopit.jpg>>

Figure 2. Still from a film made to generate outreach for the Masks for Crips project. Photo courtesy of Sandie Yi < <https://www.facebook.com/DisabilityCultureCACE>>.

Figure 2. Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi, a Taiwanese woman with dark hair and brown eyes, holds a green and blue-striped mask up to her face in her two-fingered hands. There is a speech bubble below her mouth that says, "Hello, there!!!" The image is a still from a film that Yi made to generate outreach for the Masks for Crips project. Photo credit: Sandie Yi, April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/DisabilityCultureCACE>.

How was Masks for Crips different from other mutual aid mask projects that surfaced at the onset of the pandemic?

**Alison:** There were many mask-making projects operating through Facebook and other channels at the beginning of the pandemic that had a lot of people involved and had very high mask production and distribution. But many of these mask groups were making masks for people in institutions and hospitals—as if that's the only place where disabled people would be—and the projects functioned more as charity. However, we knew there were also people living independently outside of institutions. Filling this need was a part of being in

solidarity with that part of our community and supporting interdependence and deinstitutionalization.

**Sandie:** Exactly. A lot of the other mask projects were developed with healthcare workers and people who live in nursing homes and group settings in mind. You and I have always had the interest in working with people who live outside of the nursing home systems. It was natural that we started noticing that our crip siblings and their care workers were not getting support. I don't think I was consciously thinking about my [disabled] identity. That was more in the background. It was more about "I want to look out for MY people," and for practical reasons, we limited this to people in Chicago. We considered people whose labors are unseen, like care workers and PAs [personal assistants] and were thinking, "How are disabled people who are living in the community getting protected?" They weren't! We could have helped create masks and sent them to mask collection groups, but given the fact that we are both in the disability art and culture community here in the metropolitan area of Chicago, it's natural that we decided to have a small scale project within our local network.<sup>2</sup>

What was the role of your friendship in this project and how did you work together?

**Sandie:** There's an instinctual and organic quality in the way we work together and it feels like it doesn't matter what medium we're working in or what creative disciplines that we are each in. It's about how we align politically. Sometimes it's challenging for people to work together, especially if they work in different media. But in this project, we were able to be open about how to let things flow. And that flowy-ness, that space, was the beauty of the project—that organic building process was the highlight on an individual level and a collective level for me.

**Alison:** Yes! We created a rhythm together with tasks, community engagement, and checking in. For the four month period, we shared consistency and the gift of communication and shared structure. This was meaningful at a time when it was difficult to stay connected to people. Even though we work in different mediums—I am more of a movement artist, and you, Sandie, are more of a visual artist—our political alignment, which started the project in the first place, made it feel easy. Plus, this project allowed us to call on and combine our different strengths. I can't sew for shit, so I used my other skills like creating systems, access strategizing, and outreach, which allowed you to focus on mask production.

What was the disability community's response to this project?

**Alison:** Our friends, supporters of Bodies of Work [a Chicago network of disabled artists], and crip siblings were excited to contribute, and we absolutely could not have done it without their support. There was so much enthusiasm and willingness from our community to provide support through mask-making, mask-delivery, and monetary donations, so we pooled resources. Once the mask orders started coming in, we were able to call on and collaborate with other people in our disability community networks who were excited to contribute homemade masks and offer delivery support. Sandie provided some sewing patterns as options, but we were open to whatever masks volunteers gave us. The range gave us some flexibility, too, to match the mask with the access requests of each recipient. I think in those early pandemic days a lot of us felt really helpless and scared, and so there was a strong desire to be a part of a process and for people to feel like they were building forward momentum. People also seemed eager to make personal connections and stay in relationship, since we were not seeing each other at disability culture events or at school. While we did get several hundred masks out to people, I think the personal level of being in community and feeling like people could contribute meant it was equally as generative on a personal level.



Figure 3. Screenshot from the Crip & Ally Care Exchange Instagram page, where Yi and Kopit posted on behalf of Masks for Crips. Photo courtesy of Sandie Yi.

How was disability justice central to this project?

**Alison:** Disability justice is what scaffolded this project and allowed us to build it quickly. By learning from the work of activists and artists and our crip siblings and elders, we could politically align the project with past projects we knew about [such as Mask Oakland] and build from there.<sup>3</sup> I think one of the biggest realizations for me was that at every moment when we had a question about how to manage the project, what boundaries we needed to set to make it sustainable, and what structures would care for us, we looked to disability justice principles and projects for the answers. Instead of taking hours to agonize over decisions, having this support and internalized knowledge allowed us to make decisions very clearly and quickly. It lent this beautiful decisiveness and freed us up for other things. It shows the brilliance of disability justice. For example, when we were deciding if we wanted this to be a Chicago-based project or a wider project throughout the country, we



thought about sustainability—related both to our own capacity and the environment—and we knew we had to keep it small and local. When we were worried that the project was not reaching enough people, we reminded each other that a part of working within an anti-capitalist politic—another principle of disability justice—is that our value as people is not determined by productivity, and we needed to keep it sustainable for ourselves and others. It was clear we were bolstered by this practice that was so much bigger than ourselves. And that was profound.

**Sandie:** Often, disability justice itself may seem to be a philosophy or direction—almost like a dreaming state—and through this project, I feel like I got to practice disability justice in action with you. We got to test it out. Yes, *this* is disability justice. It's not about writing or reading about it—we learned and felt it in action. There was room for us to wait and see how we were feeling, to evaluate and reevaluate our access needs, mask-recipients' needs, and needs of people delivering and producing masks. We allowed our collective actions or strategies to be informed by a commitment to cross-disability solidarity and a passion for interdependence.

**Alison:** Yes! And like you're saying, artistic imagination and mutual aid are not mutually exclusive. It's interesting how sometimes there's this idea that there's mutual aid work on one side, and that's tangible and practical and somehow void of imagination. And then there's dreaming—more nebulous work that engages our imagination. This was very practice- and resource-oriented in a pretty straightforward, tangible way—get masks to people who need them—but there was still space to dream! There was creativity and a spaciousness in the resource-driven project.

**Sandie:** Being in helping professions—for example, art therapy—we tend to think about “What is it that I *can* do for people in need?” but we often don't talk about “What are the things that I do *not* need to do, so I can allow more possibilities to take place?” In this process, we were able to free up space and check in with ourselves about our capacity so we didn't drown ourselves by diving into deep water to help others. I have had so many moments where I don't feel like I can help *everyone* and that can feel like I am not being helpful, but I like what you said about the decisiveness. It is about setting boundaries.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IMAGE-4-masks-for-crips-A-Kopit.jpg> >

Figure 4. Masks connected to the disability justice-led campaign “No Body is Disposable.” Photo courtesy of Sandie Yi.

How does this relate to your academic work?

**Sandie:** There are a lot of questions of, “Is this professional work? Personal work? Some service work that you do for community engagement?” For you and I, there are a lot of overlaps, and sometimes it almost feels like there is no boundary. And there shouldn’t be. Because it’s not that we hold this academic position higher than everything else. We recognize that it’s a part of our privilege and access, but at the same time, there’s no hierarchy—the mask project wasn’t higher or lower than our other art or academic practice. We didn’t talk specifically about “we need to practice because we’re writing about it”—it wasn’t an expectation or a rule—but we write about what we practice. And we practice because we write about it, too. For us, the focus is that we recognize this is a space we are in—academia—and our art and activism practice there is tangible. It’s the fabric of our work.

**Alison:** We are both aware of the ways that disability studies scholars have written about disability justice by engaging with it as a theoretical framework without taking it up in practice. This is harmful and appropriative—it’s not disability justice! It’s important to both of us not to reproduce this pattern as scholar-activists situated in disability justice work. We’ve both been involved in practice-based manifestations of disability justice throughout our academic careers. There was a moment early on in the project when I realized I hadn’t touched my dissertation in a week or two because we were busy with this project, and I

started to feel like I was procrastinating. And then I realized, “No, this *is* the work—it’s not a distraction!” Making that connection was a big shift for me.

How did our own disability embodiments play a role in this project?

**Sandie:** There’s something unique about masks made by the *crip* hand. The masks don’t look any different from any masks that other non-disabled crafters make. In my practice, I often make one-of-a-kind wearable items that could only fit one specific person. But in this project, the patterns were created by someone else. The masks I created here would not necessarily show any “crip signature”—unique artistic markings or obvious adaptive design techniques. But by doing this project, I realized that the crip signature took place during the process of making. So the signature is embedded. So it’s about knowing that as I create this piece, I have a specific person in mind, thinking about them and what their fabric or their fashion style may be. In addition, I think about their place in the world at this very moment of time during the pandemic. We couldn’t accommodate everyone, but did the best we could to pick a fabric that would match their personality (if we happened to know them in person) or to stay close to what they requested in their order form. It wasn’t done arbitrarily—we knew many of these people, so in a way it was like the care we put into the project was in the handmade process. “I wish you to be protected. I wish you receive this care and protection” was a message embedded in the project and in each mask.

**Alison:** A big part of the way disabled embodiment played a role is in the internalized knowledge that we needed to keep access and sustainability a priority throughout. Because we need that for ourselves, and we knew our group of mask recipients, mask production team, and mask delivery team would all need that. And those considerations, that scaffolding, was already patterned for us because of our disability experiences and time that we spend in cross-disability spaces. Someone asked us early on, “How are you finding people to send masks to?” We thought it was a funny question. They were the people in our network! We had personal connections! We were not dropping down from the sky to help “them”, we were checking in with our friends about what they needed. It wasn’t an altruistic gesture. We had built trust through our disability community relationships, and so it was easy to connect to people who needed masks and also to ask for support in outreach, delivery, and mask-making.



< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IMAGE-5-masks-for-crips-A-Kopit.jpg)

[content/uploads/2022/12/IMAGE-5-masks-for-crips-A-Kopit.jpg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IMAGE-5-masks-for-crips-A-Kopit.jpg)>

Figure 5. Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi's hand poses next to two handmade masks. Photo courtesy of Sandie Yi.

How did access play a role in different facets of the project?

**Sandie:** Access practices were a part of our doing—we provided options, and we knew delivery people would have access needs, too — access is integrated into the ways we communicate already. It's definitely not like we're doing this to be thoughtful and from our "good hearts" (this sentiment is often used to describe people who volunteer or work with disabled people). We participate actively in disability organizing and are a part of the community of disabled artists and activists in Chicago, so we wanted to check in with each other, and wanted to know what people's preferences were.

**Alison:** A favorite experience of mine was thinking through how to make mask delivery go smoothly. Because we pulled from our community, most mask recipients and delivery drivers were disabled. So, how might we assign routes to drivers who need accessible parking? How might we coordinate communication between a mask recipient who cannot text and needs phone communication and a delivery driver who is Deaf? Are there routes that allow people to avoid downtown or higher stress drives? And something I've learned so much from you, Sandie, and also from working with Sky [Cubacub] of Rebirth Garments is that making something accessible and functional and making something fashionable are not mutually exclusive!<sup>4</sup> You paid so much attention to different access needs in each mask, but also moved them away from being medical devices, and put care into thinking about the aesthetic.

How do you feel about the project, reflecting on it two years later?

**Sandie:** It was a short lived project. We weren't trying to fix everything and knew it was temporary. It was ok for it to be short. Our hope was that we wouldn't have to keep doing it, because it would mean that people were getting the care and resources they needed. We were not thinking of disability justice as one go-to or method that will save us all. But it provided an anchor for us then.

**Alison:** In the time of this project [early pandemic], there was a layer of deep fear, but also a layer of hope, that larger society would learn from disabled people. There was hope that we would all get closer together, but I think those disparities have gotten even deeper. Now, it's still the pandemic and such a bleak moment [January 2022]—we are in a huge surge brought on by the Omicron variant, and hospitals are, once again, full or nearing full. It's hard to feel hopeful. Disabled people are not prioritized—not by governmental structure or by larger society. Eugenic practices have become illuminated to an even further degree and have sharpened through the pandemic. A part of my interpretation and practice of recognizing wholeness [the disability justice practice] is not forcing myself to feel optimistic or any certain way. You're a whole person and there's wholeness in the experience and we can honor the ways we feel, even if the experience isn't always packaged really nicely with a lot of optimism.

**Sandie:** It's ok for us not to be hopeful. And also, disability justice *is* a hope, in a way, and our process has taught us that we may never know the effects of our practice. Maybe right now we are not hopeful, but maybe that's just a part of the process. So many people are asking "What do we want to keep from the pandemic?" I hate to end this on "there's more work for us to do," but it is true! What I'm thinking about is how do we take a disability justice spirit into the work we create moving forward?

## Notes

1. For information about the origins, principles, and practice of disability justice, read "Disability Justice: A Working Draft," on Sins Invalid's blog at <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne> < <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne>> . ↩
2. To view the Google form where people requested masks, visit <https://tinyurl.com/ymw4ue7p> < <https://tinyurl.com/ymw4ue7p>> . ↩
3. Mask Oakland is an environmental justice initiative that began in 2017 as a way to get masks and shelter to people during wildfires on the West Coast. Mask Oakland expanded its initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information about Mask Oakland, visit <https://maskoakland.org/> < <https://maskoakland.org/>> . ↩
4. Sky Cubacub is a queer, disabled Filipinx designer and creator of the accessible fashion line Rebirth Garments. For more information on Rebirth Garments, visit <http://rebirthgarments.com/> < <http://rebirthgarments.com/>> . ↩

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# Author Information

## Alison Kopit

Alison Kopit is a queer and disabled performance artist and access worker. She holds an MS and PhD in Disability Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has served as an artist in residence in Dance/NYC's Disability. Dance. Artistry residency program and an artist with UCLA's 2022 Dancing Disability Lab. She works as a project leader with the Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium (MAC) and also works as an independent access auditor, consultant, and dramaturg to cultural workers committed to deepening an intersectional, sustainable access practice. Her commitment to disability justice, as well as mutual aid, arts organizing, direct care, and collaborative art-making are throughlines in her work and life. She believes that collective access has the potential to transform communities, social movements, and our relationships to each other.

[View all of Alison Kopit's articles.](#)

## Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi

Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi is an assistant professor in the department of art therapy and counseling and the program director of Disability Culture Activism Lab (DCAL) at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). She has a Ph.D. in Disability Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago; an MA in art therapy from SAIC, and MFA from the University of California Berkeley. She is a disabled artist and disability culture worker whose work focuses on wearable art made for and with self-identified disabled people. As a part of the Disability Art Movement, Yi's art, Crip Couture explores the issue of intimacy, desire, and sexuality of the disabled bodymind. The latest rendition of Crip Couture researches and archives disability narratives by collecting bodily artifacts, including skin flakes and hair. Crip Couture aims to preserve and conserve disability culture and narratives as heritage. Her research interests include Disability Arts and Culture; disability fashion; accessibility design and programming for arts and cultural venues; and disability culture-informed art therapy.

[View all of Chun-shan \(Sandie\) Yi's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Handbook (and an Autistic Manifesto)

by Julie Dind | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** During the Spring semester 2020, I took an art class at the Rhode Island School of Design. “Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Handbook” was my final project for the class. Part zine, part Zoom performance experiment, part autistic meltdown, the project bears witness to my anger, isolation and fear during the lockdown. It is both a commentary on academia and the constant demand to “make use” of every experience—to continue academic life as usual even during a pandemic that saw so many disabled people die—as well as a handbook for making one’s own Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment (PPPDE) at home and an absurdist manifesto. As a research-creation project, the Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment offers a snapshot of a moment in (crip) time, that of the first state-sanctioned lockdown and of the early days of the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS** pandemic, Zoom, autism, neurodivergence, zine, PPE





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Dind-Cover-Image-julie-Dind.jpg> >

Figure 1. In the zine version of this work, this image served as the cover. For the connoisseurs, this is Eric Gjerde's origami spread hexagons tessellations, made from unbleached parchment paper. I was once one of the youngest members of the French Origami Association. Photograph by author.

## Introduction

During the Spring 2020 semester, I took an art class at the Rhode Island School of Design.

"Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Handbook" was my final project for the class. Part zine, part Zoom performance experiment, part autistic meltdown, the project bears witness to my anger, isolation and fear during the lockdown.<sup>1</sup> It is a commentary on academia and the constant demand to "make use" of every experience—to continue academic life as usual even during a pandemic that saw so many disabled people die, as well as a handbook for making one's own Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment (PPPDE) at home, and an absurdist manifesto. Against a cultural conversation that presented art-making as a way to "stay sane" during the lockdown, the Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment (PPPDE) asks, what of those of us who were never sane in the first place?

# Part I: Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Manifesto

- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment cares about disabled lives.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment cares about the environment.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment cares about elephants, cats, and hedgehogs.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment was created by proudly Autistic hands.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment was created by tired Autistic hands.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment refuses to make art to stay “sane” during the pandemic.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment was never sane.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment believes that during a pandemic, Maya Deren would have thrown her fridge across the room instead of making films.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment refuses to see disabled lives, vegetable peels, or weirdness as disposable.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment worships weirdness.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment worships daikon.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment worships Weird.
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment believes in the spirit of *mottainai*.<sup>2</sup>
- The Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment believes you should stay the fuck home.<sup>3</sup>

## Part II: *Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Handbook*

To create your own Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment, you will need:

- *One organic purple daikon. Its length should correspond to approximately half the height of your face.*
- *A large sewing needle.*
- *A kitchen knife.*
- *Scissors.*
- *Thread, preferably linen. In any case, you should use thread made of natural fibers.*
- *Compostable unbleached parchment baking paper.*



Figure 2. Profile portrait of a woman with long hair. She is looking straight ahead and holding a purple daikon in her hand, in front of her face. Photograph by author.

### **Step 1**

Start by peeling your organic purple daikon, using a kitchen knife. Make sure to leave some purple daikon flesh on the peel.



Figure 3. Caption: Still life of a purple daikon with one lengthwise section peeled off.  
Photograph by author.

Repeat until your organic purple daikon is fully peeled. Set the flesh aside.



Figure 4. Another still life of the purple daikon with five sections peeled off, lengthwise. Photograph by author.

## Step 2

Lightly salt your purple daikon peel on the fleshy side, and arrange it on a sheet of compostable unbleached parchment baking paper. Allow it to dry for approximately 48 hours.





Figure 5. Five slices of purple daikon peel, drying fleshy side up. Photography by author.

### **Step 3**

You are now ready to start assembling your Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment. First, start by arranging your purple daikon peel in an aesthetically pleasing way.



Figure 6. Purple daikon peel arranged peel side up.  
Photograph by author.

Then, using your needle and linen thread, you can start sewing the purple daikon peels together. Your peels should overlap, and you should avoid sewing too close to the edge.

Repeat until you obtain a rectangle large enough to cover your face, from your chin to your nose.





Figures 7 & 8. There is something almost surgical about the act of stitching daikon peel. The stitches on the purple daikon peel remind me of the large scars on my partner's legs, which themselves remind me of large caterpillars. Photographs by author.

#### Step 4

Your Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment is now almost ready to be worn!

At this point, it should look like this:



Figure 9. Five slices of purple daikon peel, sewn together. Photograph by author.



Using your thread and needle, create ties so that you can attach the mask to your face. Since linen thread is not elastic, you will have to fold your ears to put your mask on.

Your mask should be tight enough so that it fits your face closely, but not too tight so that it does damage your ear cartilage. Your finished mask should look like this:

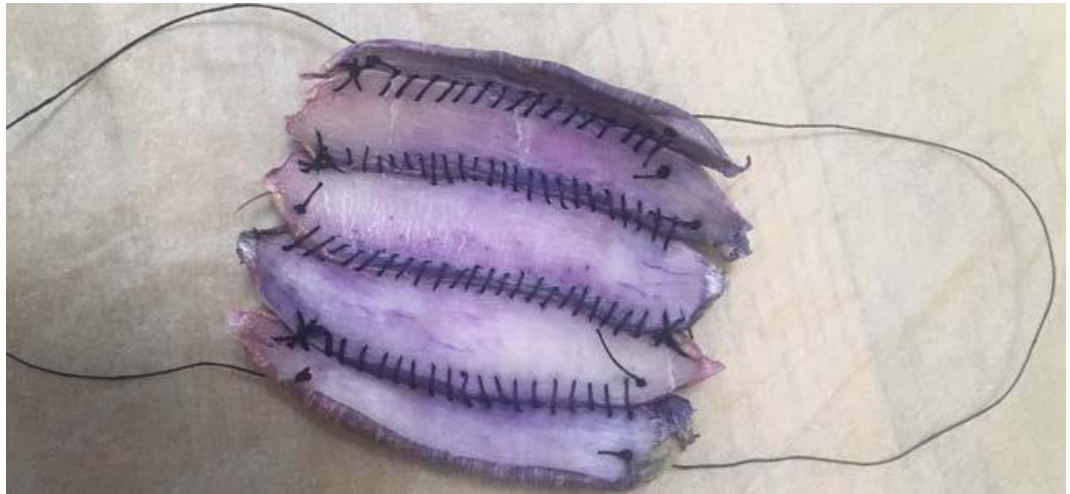


Figure 10. The stitched-together daikon with thread added as ear-loops to make it possible to wear as a mask. Photograph by author.

### **Congratulations!**

You are now the proud owner of a Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment.



Figures 11–13. Three photographs featuring a woman wearing her Personal Protective Daikon Equipment, from different angles. Photographs by author.

For optimal freshness, you should use your Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment within 48 hours of its creation. After use, allow your PPPDE to dry. It can later serve as an infusion.

Remember that disabled people are routinely denied access to ventilators.

**Stay the fuck home.**



Figure 14. In the zine version of this work, this image served as the back cover. For the connoisseurs, the paper is folded according to Eric Gjerde's "Five-and-Four" tessellation. Photograph by author.

As a last step, you can fold the compostable organic unbleached parchment paper on which you dried your organic purple daikon peels.

## Afterword

At the beginning of the pandemic, my mother sent me a handmade mask, made of red shoelaces, thick floral upcycled fabric, uneven stitching, and all of a mother's concern. A gesture of care sent across an ocean.

Over the course of the pandemic, I would accumulate more masks. First, fabric masks, whether bought, gifted, or handmade. I would even spend long hours sashiko-stitching a mask that would never be worn beyond the walls of my room: by the time I was done stitching, official recommendations had shifted to single-use masks.

As this project nears publication, my relationship to masks has changed: I got vaccinated, caught COVID (despite diligently wearing a mask every time I left my apartment), semi-recovered, got boosted, and even recently bivalent-boosted. As I revise these lines, sitting in a coffee shop near the university, not a single face around me is masked. “Staying the fuck home” stopped being an option for me when classes restarted in person. At this point in time, wearing a mask became optional, and although I became less diligent with wearing one, the pack of single-use masks I carry with me everywhere I go acts as a reminder that the pandemic is not over, not for all of us, and certainly not for many disabled and neurodivergent people. For many in my community, masks becoming optional comes with non-optional consequences.

As a research-creation project, the Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment offers a snapshot of a moment in (crip) time, that of the first state-sanctioned lockdown and of the early days of the pandemic. For Natalie Loveless, research questions, which are at the center of research-creation, set up a “dialogue with the world.”<sup>4</sup> The world with which the PPPDE project was in conversation has changed, and the dialogue has lost some of its currency.

Some of the physical iterations of the PPPDE have dried out and been preserved: they crossed an ocean to get to Norway, where they exist on one of my partner’s shelves. Some of them got moldy in the drying process and have been discarded long ago.

With time, masks and the (un)availability of masks became less of a concern. As the pandemic continues to evolve, what we are lacking isn’t masks anymore, but rather people willing to continue wearing them. Documentation of the project remains, as evidence, as a snapshot of a moment in (crip) time, as a meltdown turned zine—though the physical zine did not exist until months after the end of the lockdown, once I left my apartment and returned to the university and its printer.

This project existed—briefly—in the same time-space as my origami cranes project: for the first few days of the lockdown, in the space of my room, I folded a paper crane for each COVID case in the state of Rhode Island. I ended the project after approximately 1000 cases, 1000 paper cranes, and 3000 minutes spent folding time. It was still early April 2020, but the exponential increase in positive cases meant I ran out of origami paper, out of energy, and realized I would soon run out of minutes in a day to continue folding at the rate of daily COVID cases.



Figure 14. Documentation of the origami project, and inadvertent documentation of my work space.  
Photograph by author.

In her book *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*, Loveless engages “the question of how to make *art* at the/an end of the/a world (as we know it.”<sup>5</sup> As a research-creation project, the Personal Purple Daikon Equipment similarly engaged the question of how to make art—as part of an art *class* —in the middle of a global pandemic which felt—and continues to feel—like the end of a world, a crisis that affects my community disproportionately.

Despite the pandemic, despite the fear of getting sick while alone in a foreign country (I am an international student), despite the stress of my routine being disturbed (though, unlike many others, the pandemic did not have a major impact on my—mainly inexistant—social life), I was enrolled in an art class, and hence still had to create a project. This is not something I blame on my professors: in the middle of the pandemic, they were also still expected to work, and hence had to have us create projects.

In many ways, being a doctoral student made me one of the lucky ones during the pandemic, since I had the option to “stay the fuck home,” an option that was never afforded to many other disabled and neurodivergent people. And yet, in these first few days of the pandemic, everything felt uncertain: whether I would be able to remain in the United States

as an international student after my university made the shift to online classes, whether I would be able to come back and finish my degree if I decided to return to my home country, whether it was safe to take an airplane in the middle of a pandemic in the first place. For the most part, my support network was an ocean away.

To the institutional question of what my final project would be, the PPPDE answers with a different set of questions: what would it take to make the university care about disabled lives more than it cares about final projects? If art is supposed to “help me” during the pandemic, can it make masks miraculously appear? And if art is supposed to help us “stay sane” during the pandemic, what of those of us who were never sane in the first place?

After reading all this, you might still wonder: what does Maya Deren have to do with this?<sup>6</sup> Aside from the fact that I am obsessed with Maya Deren, someone asked me as I was taking the class, “What would Maya Deren do during the pandemic?” The expected answer was that Maya Deren would have created a film, turned the pandemic into art. After all, this is what artists are expected to do. To tell the truth, I still don’t know what Maya Deren would have done. I know what I did, though: I had an autistic meltdown, and created the PPPDE, as well as a potato peel variation.

For Loveless, “Art, as a practice of aesthetic micro-political re-attunement, encourages resilience and imaginative worlding, not by offering more facts but by finding ways, through aesthetics encounters and events, to persuade us to care, and to care *differently*.”<sup>7</sup> The PPPDE project, then, might well represent my attempt to care—and make others care about my community—*differently* and *autistically*.

You can also experience the [zine version of this project through Issuu < https://issuu.com/drawingennen/docs/pppde\\_by\\_julie>](https://issuu.com/drawingennen/docs/pppde_by_julie), or through [this PDF < https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PPPDEfinalZine.pdf>](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PPPDEfinalZine.pdf).

## Acknowledgements

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I am also grateful to my support system on both sides of the ocean: my family, my friends, and my partner, Rolf Gerstlauer.

Special thanks to Laura Odello, who was a witness to this project since its inception, and encouraged me to find it a home.

I also thank the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript and the editors of this special section for their support during the editing process.

## Notes

1. An autistic meltdown is an intense reaction to being sensory overwhelmed. For me, it feels both like wanting to withdraw from a situation AND internally feeling like throwing my fridge across the room like Maya Deren once did. See footnote 6 on Maya Deren. ↩
2. The Japanese expression *mottainai!* could be translated as "What a waste!" and is used to express displeasure about wasting. The spirit of *mottainai*, then, is to recognize the value of things and treat them with respect and care. The spirit of *mottainai* translates in my project in a desire not to waste beautiful daikon peel, not to waste (my) weirdness, and not to waste my time trying to stay "sane" during a pandemic when I perhaps never was. ↩
3. This line of my manifesto references another manifesto, the "Self-Quarantine Manifesto." For more on this, see <https://staythefuckhome.com/>. ↩
4. Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 97. ↩
5. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 105. ↩
6. Maya Deren was an American experimental filmmaker and is considered the "mother" of the American avant-garde. My partner, Rolf Gerstlauer, and I are obsessed with her work and created a film in homage to her titled *Weird Drawn at Land*. According to Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren once threw a refrigerator across her kitchen; sometimes, this is exactly what I wish to do. ↩
7. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 107. ↩

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## Author Information

### Julie Dind

Julie Dind is an autistic doctoral candidate in Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of performance studies, disability studies and philosophy. Her work autistically explores Autistic modes of performance. She is a butoh dancer, one half of the autistic-artistic couple Gerstlauer & Dind, and the proud creator of the Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment (PPPDE).

[View all of Julie Dind's articles.](#)

Julie Dind, "Personal Protective Purple Daikon Equipment: A Handbook (and an Autistic Manifesto)," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

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## How Do You Grieve During an Apocalypse?

by Jessie Male | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** This essay is a rumination on loss during the pandemic—not only the physical loss of loved ones but the loss of experiences and time. Focusing specifically on the death of my aunt, Joyce Dana Apostole, I reflect on what it means to mourn, not only as an individual but as a collective. Through the retelling of significant moments in Joyce's life and recalling our relationship, I consider the questions: How do you navigate grief when you cannot congregate with others? How is that grief compounded by institutional failures—medical, governmental—and informational lack? And how does social response to individual and mass loss reflect philosophies and policies that (continue to) devalue—and prove detrimental to—the lives of disabled people? Ultimately, this essay is not only a reflection on grief, but it is also a eulogy, an opportunity to fully recognize my aunt and her complex history, a life shaped by illness and disability in ways that counter popular narratives of recovery and overcoming. It is an archive of not only what was, but what wasn't, necessary documentation within a culture in which "return to normalcy" can become synonymous with forgetting.

**KEYWORDS** grief, memory, pandemic, COVID-19, memoir, polio, eulogy

Start with a memory.

My Aunt Joyce sits on her bed cross-legged, family surrounding her as if she is royalty. We've come on one of the "bad days." Joyce's words jumbled in a dialect of pain or pain meds; we could never be sure. Doctors say it's dementia and that she doesn't understand what is happening, but I don't believe them. I watch as Joyce watches, following the turn of a spoon filled with oatmeal as it is directed into her mouth. "Just one more bite," her daughter insists, but Joyce refuses. She has a notorious sweet tooth and I imagine the bland oatmeal is unappealing. She looks over at me and sticks out her tongue while crossing her eyes, like she always did to make me laugh when I was a child. My cousin once again attempts to feed Joyce. *Enough enough*, Joyce mouths, as she tries to push the oatmeal away.

"I don't want to remember her this way," my cousin says. I don't respond. As a memoirist, I am not inclined towards erasure, frontloading joy, reconstructing reality. I look around the

room that I know intimately. It is the last time I am there, though I don't know it yet. It looks the same as it did when I was a child, the mauve walls and large wooden dresser covered in medication bottles and jewelry. How many holidays and birthdays had I observed myself in the oversized mirror, avoiding drunken family conversation and finding a moment of respite? The room is filled with stuffed animals, porcelain dolls, and angel figurines. A small TV hums in the background. I spot the curled tail of Joyce's eighteen-year-old cat, Raina, who is hiding. So many of my aunt's comforts in one small setting.

In the bed, Joyce leans against a "husband pillow," like the one I had in college, with a built-in koozie so I could study with a drink. She sways forward and back, tipping towards me. The pillow isn't enough—isn't nearly enough. She needs more security. I say they should bring in a hospital bed for her to lie in, though I know it isn't that easy. My cousin talks about missed phone calls and forgotten deadlines with Medicaid. She says she tried to order something sturdier on Amazon, but the holidays are coming up, and thus delays in shipping. She and a family friend are managing around-the-clock care, the friend living in the apartment and my cousin staying over during his break on Saturdays. I don't understand why there isn't a caseworker or part-time aide providing support, and yet of course I do. I too have a parent in pain, and I know the many ways the system fails disabled people. I've seen the exhaustion and frustration that can come from constantly needing to advocate.

Later, when Joyce is dead, my cousin says all she remembers are the final months. The transport back and forth from Joyce's apartment to the hospital for treatment of bedsores and dehydration. The final move from hospital to nursing home during the bitter cold of February. Joyce's cries upon realizing they weren't going back to her apartment, and she wouldn't be able to collect her belongings. The image of Joyce waking up in a vacant room without Raina against her side. The first cases of COVID, the closure of the nursing home to family. A nurse pressing a phone to my aunt's ear so she can scream to a daughter she isn't allowed to see.

"Why did you leave me?" my aunt cries into the phone. "Why did you leave me."

When I think of Joyce's body, the way she held space, I think of her hands. Her long, manicured fingernails, unchipped, perfected at the salon every week.

"The day I stop getting my nails done is the day I die," Joyce would say. They were always painted a lacquered ballet pink. I'd eye the smooth surface as she clasped our hands in an embrace. When we'd visit her at her apartment in the Bronx, she'd call to me, "*Bubbe, come here bubela,*" and gesture towards an empty seat at the kitchen table, and roll herself towards me. Joyce loved to hold hands, and she would gently rub her thumb against my skin as she spoke to me. I both craved these moments and found them unnerving. I was

more like my mother—Joyce's younger sister—who was less fond of touch, preferring brief hugs or "a kiss on the *keppie*."

My mother and Joyce were so different and yet as children were treated as twins, dressed in matching clothing and taking up the same hobbies. In 1953, the two contracted polio from a public pool in Chula Vista, California. Their family had recently relocated after my grandfather's New York City butchery business failed and he refused to declare bankruptcy. It was supposed to be a *better life*—the phrase he repeated throughout their move— and for several weeks California seemed a place of pure possibility. In photographs, the sisters, five and seven years old, wear capri pants and halter tops, posing amongst palm trees. The family moved into a split-level rental and waited for their furniture to arrive from Brooklyn. It was mid-August, and the days were long. A public pool was the only respite from the heat.

My mother felt the symptoms first. She woke up and couldn't catch her breath, couldn't move her arms or legs. Days later, Joyce sat down on the toilet and couldn't get up. After Joyce's diagnosis, the sisters lay next to each other in a locked polio ward for thirteen days.

I grew up hearing the stories about this time, when *before polio* became *after polio*, a particular grief. Life split in two, quickly cut as if by a sharp knife. My mother, seemingly recovered, walked out of the polio ward, returning to the split-level house, basking in the illusion of the *before* times. Joyce remained paralyzed from the waist down and was transferred to a rehabilitation facility. Before she came home, the family moved into a ranch house so she wouldn't have to navigate stairs. My grandfather preferred she use braces as it was easier to pass as nondisabled, but years later, after Joyce had children, she chose to utilize a wheelchair full time.

As a child—and even later—I never understood the strangeness people associated with Joyce's wheelchair. The novelty. Strangers would approach Joyce and ask how she had children and she'd respond, deadpan, "I pushed them out of my vagina." When they told her how lucky she was to have a man who loved her, she'd respond, "He is lucky to be with me." Her humor was a weapon, and she deployed it with ease. In most photographs she harbors one of two expressions; she's been caught mid-laugh, or there is a secret she is keeping.

When I was very young—the baby of the family, and clearly her favorite—she'd pull me onto her lap and we'd roll through her apartment, banging into doorways like a game of bumper cars. Attached to the arms of the wheelchair were hair ties that were popular in the 1990s, shaped like an infinity symbol with big rubber balls on the ends. I'd roll them around with the palm of my hand. The small details you remember. Now, as the nineties are back in fashion, I always look for those hair ties at the pharmacy.

Back then, Joyce gave my belly button a nickname. She called it Lucille.

"Where is Lucille? Where?" she'd ask me, and I'd run to her, lifting up my shirt. She'd poke at my round child belly protruding over the top of the elastic waistband of my OshKosh B'gosh jeans.

"There she is!" she'd proclaim, and I'd fall into her, giggling.

And what loss I felt, years later, when I sat in the same apartment and Joyce held my hand and asked, "What did we call your belly button?"

We sat there for a long time, the two of us, tossing names back and forth: Betsy? Carol? Phil? Finally, one of us said, "Lucille. It was Lucille." There was a long pause. We'd just finished our annual Christmas dinner, and in the background, I could hear my father putting paper plates and empty Chinese food containers into large plastic bags. I wondered what else I had forgotten.

"Lucille. Why in the world would I ever call it that?" Joyce asked, breaking the silence between us.

Joyce dies on March 25, 2020, the same day the New York governor shuts down all non-essential businesses. At a press conference, the New York City mayor announces: "Things will continue to get worse before they get better." He adds: "Lives are on the line."

When my cousin calls to tell me about Joyce, I let it go to voicemail. I teach writing at NYU, and in a few minutes, I have a meeting with other student advisors about the recent shift online. Institutional changes are only getting started and I already feel at capacity. In my inbox, emails are stacked one on top of the other with capitalized subject lines. Students can't get their belongings from their dorms and are worried about meeting deadlines. They can't make it to class because their computer is shared with a sibling. They tell me about parents and grandparents contracting COVID and thus needing to take on additional responsibilities. I give out my phone number to students, renegotiating boundaries. One student calls from California and as I talk to him, sirens scream endlessly outside my Brooklyn apartment building.

My cousin texts PLEASE CALL ME and immediately I know what is coming. I look at the clock. The meeting I am supposed to be at is starting in four minutes. I teach my first online synchronous class in two hours, and I am nervous about navigating new technology. I wish I could postpone reality, but I know that is an unfair luxury. When I call my cousin back the conversation is brief. With a fifteen-year age difference between us, we are not close, our shared interests limited to celebrity gossip and family. After I get off the phone, I cry and email my supervisor, explain the circumstances, and apologize for missing the meeting.

She responds: *I'm sorry to hear about your aunt. What a difficult time to lose a family member.*

Seventeen months later, I look back at that email and almost laugh.

What a difficult time.

What a difficult time.

Then, in New York City, there were 6,506 positive cases of COVID-19 and 71 fatalities.<sup>1</sup>

Then, we took the word of those who said Joyce probably died of a bacterial infection, that after years of post-polio syndrome and other ailments, her body had grown too weak.

Then, we turned on the television and listened to our governor, who started each morning briefing with a smile and an announcement of the date. Pointing to data as if it was a countdown clock on New Year's Eve. Now, we know about the cover-ups, the numbers underestimated, the causes of death smudged or erased.

I don't like to think of Joyce's final moments or her final days. If nurses came when she called out to them, or if they ignored her due to understaffing and seemingly more urgent needs. The irony of a polio survivor probably dying either directly or indirectly from another highly contagious virus is not lost on me. That she died alone in an empty room resembling where she lay in a polio ward is an echo that makes me curl into my chest with a visceral ache.

Throughout the pandemic, I've often thought of the young adult book *The Giver*, which was required school reading in the 1980s and 90s. In the book, the main character, Jonas, lives in a community of "Sameness," in which he—The Receiver—is the only member who can access feeling, color, or memory. Everyone in the community has a designated role to fulfill, and those who are "unfit" to contribute to society—underweight infants, the elderly—are killed after a ceremony known as "release." The book is marketed as dystopian but now it reads as real life. In the years since COVID emerged, the desire for normalcy—for productivity—has superseded care for vulnerable members of the community. There are so many elderly and disabled people dead because of COVID and related neglect: the grandparents of my students; disabled activists and artists whose work we study. In class we unpack the rhetoric used to explain their deaths, the ways that doctors and politicians validate "difficult choices." The language used to soften inequity.

When Omicron barrels through the country— New York City, an epicenter once again—I listen, mouth open (though how could I possibly be surprised) as the CDC director proclaims that seventy-five percent of those killed by the new variant "were unwell to begin with."

"This is very encouraging news," the interviewer says.

"Very encouraging news," the CDC director repeats.

Towards the end of *The Giver*, Jonas's mentor—The Giver—states, "The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It's the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared."<sup>2</sup> After Joyce dies, I want to enact the kind of exchange The Giver describes but sharing seems impossible. We cannot coordinate a funeral, or sit *shiva* at my cousin's home, or have late night toasts yelling "remember *that* time, remember *that* time." We cannot eulogize my aunt, or even resurface old tensions and fight. My cousin is relieved to learn obituaries aren't required in New York State. It is one less thing to do; in a pandemic, every responsibility feels ten times its expected size. In retrospect, I should have offered to write one, or at least set up a memorial website. Yet I too was overwhelmed. I only left the house for midnight grocery runs, or late-night outings with my husband and dog when we'd walk down the middle of deserted Brooklyn streets, not another person in sight.

I wish we had an occasion to be together and share stories. Our immediate family is small, but Joyce was one of twelve first cousins, just from the maternal side. In another version of this story, they are available to fill in the many gaps in what I know of her life.

Joyce was an expert storyteller, known to add flourish and spin. Characters compressed and plots edited for time. "Let me make sure I'm telling you the truth," Joyce told me once, and though I appreciated the transparency, I would have equally enjoyed a lie. I could listen to her for hours. She always had a story: about a husband, a boyfriend, a lover, the super she kissed when he came to check on her radiator, the FedEx guy, the long-lost teenage love from a summer in the Catskills (they spoke of a future together, but his parents forbid him from marrying a disabled woman) who she found forty years later and then spoke to on the phone every night. When she left her first husband—another polio survivor she met at a support group coordinated by my grandfather—she started dating a man who worked at the local deli and had a side gig as a bookie. Richie was a large Italian man with a gruff voice from years of throat cancer and the many polyps that had been removed. He drove a big black Cadillac with a large front seat Joyce could easily be lifted into. When he brought home stacks of hundred-dollar bills, she stuffed them into pillowcases, just in case. Joyce told me once—though without these specific words—their relationship wasn't romantic but was rooted in interdependency. He helped raise her children and later, a grandchild. She took care of him when he had one stroke, and then another, and then when the cancer spread to his brain and other parts of his body.

When Richie died, Joyce took over the bookie business. Medicaid didn't cover her bills, and she needed the money. She lived in a large apartment building on top of a very tall hill and men would use the intercom to buzz and ask for Richie.

"Just leave the money in a paper bag downstairs," Joyce told them.

"Isn't it dangerous?" my mother asked Joyce.

"What's the worst thing that can happen?" Joyce replied. "If they come here to break my legs, I'll tell them someone beat them to it."

She subverted the system in ways I could never fathom, was resourceful in ways I could never be—didn't *have* to be. What some saw as a slippery nature, was actually her self-advocacy.

Joyce is my muse, as is my mother, their shared experience with polio, and its aftermath, a constant focus of my writing. Yet this does not mean that Joyce is "an inspiration" or a narrative of recovery, the culturally idealized shift from suffering to normalcy. She took what she thought she was owed, once asking my mother to bail her out of jail when caught shoplifting (handcuffed to the door of the police car, she turned to the arresting officer and asked, "What do you think I'm going to do, run away?"). She was impulsive and temperamental, a combination meaning she and my mother would fight and go months or even years without speaking. And yet, some of the only times I've seen my mother laugh was when she was with Joyce. In a photograph, four of us sit on a white couch—Joyce, my mother, my older sister, and me. It's an impromptu photograph, caught at the end of a punchline. I'm no more than ten and laughing full-bodied, leaning forward with an open mouth and closed eyes. My mother is smiling, dressed in her L.L.Bean best, and Joyce is next to her in a bright blue tracksuit and sunglasses, though we're inside. She looks mid-dance, hands extended, and head tipped back. What was the joke? I want to press the picture like I do on my phone and watch a few seconds live.

Joyce was always a performer, as a young child the best in her ballet class, mastering leg and arm extensions while my far less enthusiastic mother was forced into tap dancing. After polio, Joyce stopped dancing and my mother began ballet. I've often thought of how Joyce felt, in the audience, watching her sister *jeté* and *pirouette* across the stage. Did she wish over and over it was she who danced and my mother who watched her? It all seemed so arbitrary, the different ways they recovered. It so easily could have gone the other way.

"There are so many ways that life can break your heart," the memoirist Grace Talusan writes.<sup>3</sup> I've taught her book *The Body Papers* for several semesters in a class on disability memoir and return to that line each time. I think about this in relation to the initial fissure when the sisters got sick. As Joyce became older there were many other *before*s and *after*s. Before her boyfriend's parents forbade them from marrying. Before abuse by those in medical and educational settings (she described the crushed feeling of being pressed up against the wall by a high school teacher; the *squeak* of her crutches against linoleum as

she tried to run away). Before my grandfather's heart attack when Joyce was only twenty-five. Before my grandmother's diagnosis of dementia soon after. Before her first husband's drinking cost him his job and most of their money. Before Richie died. Before the post-polio syndrome caused her to feel like "I have polio all over again," as she described to me, weakening her arm strength until she could not transfer herself from bed to wheelchair, and revealing nerve damage that caused shooting pain down her back and legs.

She suffered, and that suffering is an important part of her story. Being a disability studies scholar I worry about that admission. As many in the field note, such a statement can be easily mobilized towards practices aligned with eugenic philosophies. Tobin Siebers warns that pain is used "as a motive force to justify disability oppression,"<sup>4</sup> an actuality we witnessed early in the pandemic, when limited resources—oxygen, ventilators—meant nondisabled people were prioritized because of their assumed better quality of life. "She's no longer suffering," my cousin says when she tells me about Joyce's death. Her language of grief, the stories we tell ourselves. But my language is different. I know that Joyce suffered. I still want her to be alive.

One of the last times I saw Joyce, she gave me a bottle of hair conditioner. With Joyce, gifts were unpredictable. A handmade scarf. Bubble bath. Shoplifted earrings from Macy's or rings purchased from QVC. They often weren't my style, but I didn't mind. As the years passed, Joyce left the apartment less and less, and I am (as my husband will attest) a difficult person for whom to go shopping. Besides, I was no longer the baby of the family, and when we gathered for holidays, Joyce's grandchildren were the focus. They surrounded her, holding her hands, thanking her for their Barbie dolls and coloring books. A *Rock and Roll Christmas* in the background, they danced with her in the living room, wrapping paper and plastic boxes strewn at their feet. That visit, Joyce and I had a quiet moment, alone. She asked me if I was happy—she worried, knowing our family history of depression and anxiety. She asked me about children. I was thirty-six, four years married and finishing graduate school. The question of whether I would have a child seemed to be on everyone's mind.

"I don't feel ready," I told her. She was always a person to whom I could easily confess, to whom as a teenager I spoke freely about boys and intimacy.

"You don't need to rush it," Joyce said. "You still have time to decide."

It was so simple. It was nonjudgmental. She didn't try to convince me of one choice or another. What she said was just right.

The hair conditioner was useful. When I came home, I realized I had run out, and I placed the tall black and purple bottle prominently on the top shelf in my shower. I'd squirt the



conditioner into my hand, massage my scalp, and run my fingers through thick strands. My hair is long and dense, just like hers when she was younger, before she cut it pageboy length. Joyce would often talk about the similarities between us—our thick hair, our ample chests, our sensitive natures. I too was prone to outbursts. Our temperaments aligned. For more than two years, the conditioner has stayed on that shelf, compressed tightly between full bottles, flipped upside down, taking up precious space. I often think about putting it in the garbage, but not today. Maybe tomorrow. Not quite.

My grief is an empty bottle of conditioner.

My sister and I go to my cousin's house in Stamford, Connecticut. It's September 2020; almost Joyce's birthday. This is the first time since COVID that we've seen each other in person, though the three of us talk often on FaceTime. It's still months before any of us are vaccinated, and at first, we're not sure about hugging. When I finally wrap my arms around my cousin, I am struck by her skeletal frame, so narrow, like my mother's, who since Joyce's death has stopped eating and sleeps for fourteen or more hours at a time.

"Want to see my mom?" my cousin asks. I gasp, momentarily forgetting. In that second it can be 1987. It can be January 2020. My cousin takes us into the living room, and on the top of a cabinet a giant bronze urn is on display. Pictures of Joyce's grandchildren surround it. There is a large purple crystal in the corner. Small angel figurines. We have a moment of silence, and I tell my cousin it is a beautiful place to rest in peace.

We all have our idols, our small altars, our mementos. "*Too many tchotchkes,*" my mother says when she enters my apartment. I admit—I attach objects to memories. Soon after stores reopen in New York City, I go to a Salvation Army. I roam the aisles, masked and touching fabrics, enjoying a moment without a television displaying the death rate. I spot a small plastic sculpture of a cat climbing out of a trunk and draped in white beads. Crudely painted dollar bills and coins line the base. JEWELRY, it boldly says on the front. It's ugly and impractical and of course I buy it; it features all of Joyce's favorite things. I place it on my writing desk, right below a framed picture of her at sixteen. The photo was taken at a talent show at the Catskills. In the picture, Joyce stands, relying on a brace to hold her weight. She's in a pale blue dress with a large pink belt cinched around her small waist. She's caught mid-note, long fingers extended, and mouth slightly open, singing alone on a stage.

My writing mentor, Louise DeSalvo, once told my graduate school cohort that we must write into our shame. What were we most scared to share with others? What would it mean to set that free?

I'm ashamed to admit that I don't think about Joyce much anymore, at least not in the day to day. When she was alive, we only saw each other two or three times a year, and especially as I became older, we spoke inconsistently. I know she wished our relationship maintained the ease of when I was a child, when we would swap Keds sneakers because we had the same size feet. Once, in my twenties, I went alone and visited her in her Bronx apartment and brought bagels and cream cheese for her and her aide. The three of us sat in her bedroom while she told stories about her childhood. She held my hand as she talked to me. I was grateful for the luxury of these hours together, without the distraction of other members of our family. "Come back anytime," she told me before I left. "It's so rare that I have company."

Why didn't I ever return by myself to talk with her further? During that visit, she was already in her sixties. Was I in such denial, so avoidant of the reality of her death, though she often spoke about its inevitability?

Admittedly, the weight of the past few years has made it more difficult to access many concrete memories of my time with Joyce. The space for grief and recollection has been compressed even further as COVID resurges. As I write this, during what I hope is the peak of the Omicron variant, there are over a million new cases reported each day. On the map of global hotspots, the United States is the color of coagulated blood. My husband and I meet friends for a walk in Prospect Park and air hug awkwardly when we say goodbye. At the grocery store I accidentally touch a woman's hand as we're both reaching for hummus, and I see the fear as she quickly pulls away.

But what I think about often—especially in the most isolated moments, of which there are many—is the *feeling* of being with Joyce. The anticipation as we took the elevator to her apartment. She was only on the second floor, and as the elevator crept up, I could hear her laughter, music on the radio, the ringing of the telephone as my father told her he found parking. Every step seemed choreographed, part of my favorite routine. Other than weddings or other large celebrations, we only saw each other at my childhood home or Joyce's apartment, and perhaps part of that comfort was in being so contained. When I close my eyes, I can see her opening the door to greet us, the rounded archways, the pink walls, the framed photographs adorning the hallway.

This is what I hold onto, the small scenes, the brief sketches. There is so much regret about what I have forgotten, memories pushed out to make more space. But how easily I recall the tight script of Joyce's writing on the cards she sent for every occasion, the curve of the "J" in both our names. How she patted the side of her bed for me to come close. The way she sighed before the most difficult part of a story. The sound of her voice on a message I forget to return, saying *I love you, please call me*.

# Notes

1. "New York City, New York Covid Case and Exposure Risk Tracker," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/new-york-city-new-york-covid-cases.html>. ↩
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## On Navigating Paranoia, Repair, and Ambivalence as Crip Pandemic Affects, Or, I'm So Paranoid, I Think Your COVID Test Is About Me

by Jiya Pandya | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** How do my “hermeneutics of suspicion” color this current crisis? In this auto-theoretical essay, I reflect upon the blend of judgment, suspicion, and paranoia that have settled into my body-mind this past year, and how these feelings shape my engagement with people, institutions, and systems. I have been taught that “judgment” is an essential aspect of immigrant and crip safety. Recently, it has become my (crip)epistemology, and I cannot decide whether this is for better or worse. On the one hand, suspicion is productive. It has kept me and my loved ones alive in a time of deliberate death. On the other, it frustrates, disrupting my capacity for connection. I check my temperature constantly, I hear the guilt in my voice when my family in India tell me they have not left the apartment in months, I spend precious time with friends calculating their risk relative to mine, I go to protests but am afraid of the consequences of my solidarity. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s essay on paranoid reading practices, Patricia Stuelke’s *Ruse of Repair*, Sianne Ngai’s work on ugly feelings, Nikolas Rose’s analyses of somatic ethics, and Mel Chen’s theory of racialized toxins, I explore the modalities that paranoia has both enabled and disabled for me. I examine my ambivalent relationship with repair—some reparative practices like mutual aid sustain queer/crip/immigrant community while others like cure constrict our lives. This piece aims to tease out the tensions latent in crip worldmaking between suspicion and generosity, public health and communal care, and paranoia and repair.

**KEYWORDS** affect, queer, crip, embodied politics, care, paranoia, repair, ambivalence

### Introduction—Try Breathing

It is April 2021. Standing at the bathroom sink, staring at the mirror stained with toothpaste streaks and soap stains, I wait for the beeping. The cold metal of the thermometer pushes

under my tongue as I scroll through Instagram, photographs of unmasked acquaintances posing against Hawaii sunsets tagged #PandemicTravel mixing with single-color infographic squares which declare 'YOUR CHRONICALLY ILL FRIENDS NEED YOU TO STAY THE F\*\*K AT HOME. OUR LIVES DEPEND ON IT.' My roommate walks past. "Isn't this the fourth time today you're taking your temperature?" I shrug, and the machine lets out two quick high-pitched beeps. I extract it. Exhale. Examine. No fever. The screen flickers. I panic, take a sharp breath in, air catching in the back of my throat. The numbers stay the same. I rinse the thermometer, and emerge into the living room, sighing, pushing the air out of my chest that I just sucked in, in the hopes that clearing my lungs might help. It does not. I take a seat at the dining table and resume my scrolling. I know I should feel relief, but the paranoia has become routine. It is simply a matter of time before I stick the cold metal under my tongue again. My roommate pours me a cup of coffee. "What is the point of being so paranoid? How long will you do this for? What does it do for you or anyone else? Aren't you tired of feeling this way?"

In this essay, which I composed between December 2021 and January 2022, I try to unpack these questions. Pandemic culture, or rather my experience of it, like the virus itself, has adapted and morphed into a whole new array of problematics since 2021. But for the first two years of our ongoing global public health disaster, and even since in ways I have not fully comprehended, paranoia, and the suspicious, contradictory feelings that accompany it, have become my primary mode of emotional interpellation with the world. It is quite evident to me and those around me that I *am* paranoid, and this paranoia often presents myriad difficulties. To find a way through, I have been chewing on the modalities of this paranoia, its temporalities, impacts, limits, and alternatives.

Drawing on work by scholars who examine cultural manifestations and political efficaciousness of the emotions and epistemologies that comprise affect, I emphasize the individual, sensory, physical, and psychic modalities of paranoia. Paranoia, in this piece, then, is at once individual and collective, embodied and relational. I understand that affect is distinct from feeling, but, particularly now, during a time of mass debilitation, the embodied act of experiencing affect is essential to its structuring of our epistemologies, ontologies, and social movements.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible for me *not* to think of paranoia's reach in my body-mind when unpacking its use and misuse amidst crises which directly impact body-minds, such as a global pandemic, racialized carcerality, gendered violence, attacks on sexual minorities, and climate catastrophe. As such, I reach for auto-theory in this piece because, as Caitlin Merrett King writes in "Unsure Theory," it allows me to think with these concepts as "not really about me, even though it definitely is all about me," offering both critical distance and critical relief.<sup>2</sup>

This essay begins with and follows Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay on paranoia to explore where paranoid practices both open room for and push against what I want my world to be. I parse through how Sedgwick's definitions of paranoia mimic my practices, how her critiques parallel my hesitations, and, in following my roommate's questions, what my paranoia *does* through its temporal and political orientations. I then turn to the alternative Sedgwick offers to paranoia, that of "repair," which is a tempting mode of praxis, following crip practices of care-work and mutual aid. Yet, because of how paranoid I am, I try to articulate my unease with certain forms of repair, following Patricia Stuelke's warnings that it can be absorbed into neoliberal politics and futurities. I end with ambivalence, following work by feminist, queer, and crip scholar-activists who have theorized it before me, and pulling particularly from a recent essay by Caitlin Merrett King. I offer it to myself and you as the reader as an opportune affect for our current moment, one which allows us to hold paranoia and repair in productive tension, while committing to neither individually nor the two as a binary.

## Paranoia—Inhale—Let the Suspicion In

Suspicion has settled into my tissues, my mind, and my writing since I got COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, but I am by no means new to paranoia. To keep my body-mind safe as it traverses between India and the United States while navigating gender, queerness, disability, race, trauma, and citizenship, I have relied on my sense of suspicion. When walking down a dark road, when being patted down at the airport, when dancing around a name in conversations in order to stay protected, when being the only person who looks like me in a room, when in a visa office or a doctor's office or a therapist's office—I have learned, the hard way, to be suspicious of the immediacy of systemic violence and my interactions with people imbricated within those systems.

The virus, however, has driven this suspicion deeper, making it central, almost cellular, in a way it had not been before. If, previously, it had been an awareness, it is now an epistemology. The suspicion has made me fearful of losing control over my body, even as control has always been unattainable, deepening my own investments in what Mel Chen describes as "individual bodily, emotional, and psychic security."<sup>3</sup> While I have religiously avoided doctors out of a mistrust of biomedical expertise, I check my temperature constantly, hyper-conscious of every scratch in throat, flush of skin, twitch in muscle. Before getting a booster, I wore not one, but two N-95 masks when leaving the house, and crossed the street any time I saw anyone unmasked around me. I judged those around me who did not do the same. I follow long COVID websites obsessively, suspended in inaction, avoiding diagnosis. Nikolas Rose argues that in the past few decades we have seen "selfhood" become "intrinsically somatic" and "biopolitics" have entered "the domain of

decision and choice.”<sup>4</sup> The sense of “threatened immunity” promulgated by an air-borne disease has rendered porous the traffic of paranoia between the epistemological, social, relational, and personal; fusing my own “will to health” with my attempts at care work, political engagement, and intellectual labor.<sup>5</sup>

As the virus updates, so does my paranoia—I stick testing swabs up my nose weekly while scrolling Twitter. I observe the anger of those around me who cannot leave their homes because the world is operating as if COVID is no longer a threat. I see those whose vulnerability to the pandemic shaped my own decisions around safety now resuming their pre-pandemic routines because staying at home is simply no longer an option—because of work, because of their surroundings, because of differing access to information, or rather, different paradigms of information. I think about context, I worry about my own choices, I worry about what is being assumed about my choices. The worry does not change my newly recurring bouts of nausea, dizziness, and migraines (especially after more than an hour in a mask); it does not make people I know mask indoors; it does not stop my partner’s workplace from putting our household in virus-friendly scenarios weekly. It does, I suppose, shape my own erratic and continuously self-debated practices of safety, my attempts to be cognizant and careful, but it also lets me *do* nothing for anyone but myself, as I monitor my own choices in order to maintain a sense of control.

Sedgwick describes paranoia as a “cognitive, affective, theoretical practice” which “knows some things well and others poorly.”<sup>6</sup> She connects psychoanalytical genealogies of paranoia, learned from Freud, Tomkins, and Klein, to forms of contemporary critique to argue that paranoia, or the “hermeneutics of suspicion” have become the primary form of theorizing the “social” and related abstracted systems of power, exposing its seemingly “hidden” mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick, as Ramzi Fawaz describes, “was a theorist of tendencies, of the ways in which what we tend toward . . . shapes and reshapes not only our sense of self but our ethical relationship to the world at large.”<sup>8</sup> In Sedgwick’s words, paranoia, as a tendency, can have “an unintentionally stultifying side effect,” shaping an ethical mode that is fundamentally reactive, one with a “distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise.”<sup>9</sup> My paranoia certainly is reactive, anticipatory, and retroactive. I defend its primary political function—keeping me and people around me *safe*—but in the name of safety it often looks over its shoulder, judges, jumps to conclusions, and reaches for decisions and clean attempts at closure which never will arrive.

My practices of “safety” in the pandemic have enabled me to *feel* in control of my body and my political values, but in so doing have contradicted both my values and my bodily needs by betraying my commitment to care and interdependence. Paranoia allows little room for flexibility and surprise, averse above all, as Sedgwick describes, to an experience of

unknowing or unpreparedness.<sup>10</sup> In attempts to control whatever little is possible, I, like so many others, have hoarded masks and test-kits because I can afford to, in an attempt to protect my own sense of security, at the expense of those with less funds and less ability to safely leave the house than me. The sense of security I gain from hoarding is fleeting, a fantasy of individual sovereignty in a time when individual safety is pitted against an undefined, generalized Other bearing a distant, external “risk.”<sup>11</sup> In India, where I grew up and was doing research during the Omicron spike, paranoia around “public health” led to rapidly imposed lockdowns which left millions of poor, often low-caste, migrant workers stranded, subject to violent practices like being publicly hosed down with disinfectant in the name of “sanitation.”<sup>12</sup> I have heard warnings from those around me to stay away from “impure” and “unhygienic” groups, terms often coded in classist and casteist logics. In the United States, where I am based, similarly, houseless folks have been subject to carceral sanitation logics and police harassment around cleanliness, a problem that has long intersected with disability and race.<sup>13</sup> Even as I *critically* distance myself from practices of policing and untouchability, my anxieties have made me *physically* distance myself from those classified as an ambiguous “risky” Other, making me complicit in the very practices I seek to dismantle.

Suspicion and paranoia become undoubtedly “ugly” feelings, which, following Sianne Ngai’s conceptualization, are “explicitly amoral and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release.”<sup>14</sup> Too tired of my own anger and too privileged to feel fear, an orientation towards paranoia has provided me a convenient affect: suspicious at every scale, but suspended in inaction. This inaction makes me suspicious of my suspicion, paranoid about my paranoia, wondering both whether I am doing too much or doing too little. Reminders of the limits of paranoia have forced me to reckon with my own affect, or at least question it to better understand it as a “changing heterogenous and relational stance, rather than as a “stable personality type.”<sup>15</sup> I am trying to stop myself from judging the morality and virtue of those around me if they do not exhibit the same suspiciousness, trying to tell myself that those around me are not inherently racist or ableist just because they are not as mistrustful. While I try to retain my desire for my and other’s safety as a political imperative for crip survival, something I believe to be a worthy end in and of itself, I have to remind myself not to tie neat bows around cripness, to remember solidarities which do not seem apparent in conversations on individualized safety and risk. This becomes particularly relevant as the pandemic that we remain steeped in collides with crises in government, environment, and law, with disease and death hyper-visible for those willing to look, suspicion and conspiracy ever-present in engagements with those who believe these crises to be a “hoax.”

The fact that paranoia has been mobilized by all sections of the political spectrum makes it even more essential to interrogate. Sedgwick, writing while witnessing the rise of Clinton



and the Democratic establishment in the 1990s, pointed out that paranoia had been coopted by the political right as a “narrow-gauge,” “incoherent,” and “hyper-demystified” hermeneutic.<sup>16</sup> This, she argued, made it far less useful to queer studies than its affective orientation as critique in the beginnings of queer theory. If anything, in an era of fake news, WhatsApp university, fascist IT cells, and Parler, this paranoia is even more cemented in the contemporary right-wing zeitgeist, with attempts to legitimize it through performances of rigor.<sup>17</sup> In light of this, Ngai’s contention that intellectuals and cultural critics need to “recognize the way in which conspiracy theory seems intimately tied to the hermeneutic quests of male agent-intellectuals” holds particular relevance, especially for those of us invested in feminist, queer, and crip projects that have long been accustomed to paranoid forms of critique that seek to expose and deconstruct the logics of power that are hiding in plain sight.<sup>18</sup>

When circulating as a masculinist epistemology, as it often does, paranoia is treated as a valorized “enabling condition of knowledge” for some groups of people and an “ignoble emotionalism” for others.<sup>19</sup> Consider, for instance, Joe Biden’s remarks in September 2021 on “our patience wearing thin” during what he calls the “pandemic of the unvaccinated.”<sup>20</sup> This statement, part of a larger discourse on the “unvaccinated” in binaristic opposition to the “vaccinated,” ignored the many reasons people are not vaccinated. This binary is intended to incite panic through its own paranoid rhetoric, collating and dismissing global inequities around vaccine access with the various reasons for low vaccination rates emerging from different *forms* of paranoia. While a number of people on the political right see being vaccinated as an erosion of their agency during a “scamdemic,” a large proportion of Black Americans did not get vaccinated early on due to the long history of racialized eugenics and the systemic inaccessibility of medical resources for certain communities.<sup>21</sup> I have definitely found myself guilty of decrying “the unvaccinated” en masse. This line of thinking is possible because of my own ability to participate in elitist white supremacy, and lack of recognition of privilege as someone from a model minority receiving privatized healthcare. Moreover, it has been pointed out to me by anti-racist comrades that Black Americans have proven far more likely to overcome their vaccine hesitancy with careful outreach, showing that this critical form of paranoia comes from a far more relational and historically rooted epistemology than its counterpart’s oppositional and risky one.<sup>22</sup>

Ableism and sanism further shape the legitimacy of certain forms of paranoia, making it in many ways a politically *ineffective* affect. While paranoia is deployed as an “affect” and “orientation” for able-bodied, “rational,” patriarchal, heteronormative actors on the one hand, it is used as a diagnostic tool to dismiss disabled, mad, Black, brown, and poor folks on the other. S. Cavar’s blog post from the early stages of the pandemic describes the tensions of living with diagnosed OCD in a moment when paranoid compulsions have

become normative modes of health.<sup>23</sup> Although my roommate might mock me for taking my temperature four times a day, she understands this to be an eccentricity in a moment of crisis, rather than a diagnosis that distances me from routine performances and practices of normalcy. I get to explain away the limits of my empathy through the phrase “COVID anxiety,” when I interrogate a grieving friend I am caring for during a visit—have they been tested? Can they show me their results? The knowledge won’t change my ability to protect myself, but the assumed temporary temporality of crisis makes my desire permissible. What happens if and when COVID does “end,” though? While “sane and insane have proven to be malleable descriptors which rely on ever-changing social standards,” Cavar writes, “I wonder what will become of us once this moment of collective madness is complete.”<sup>24</sup>

## Repair—Exhale—Locate Your People

Given the structural and literal violence enabled by embodied, relational, social, and epistemological paranoia during the pandemic, Sedgwick’s call for reparative affect is certainly compelling. Writing in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis while grappling with her own debilitating experience of disease, she argues that paranoia’s method of “exposé” has political limits in a society where oppression is a blatant given.<sup>25</sup> In response to paranoia’s singular, reactionary, stultified hermeneutic, Sedgwick offers the reparative as a recognition of “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”<sup>26</sup> Sedgwick does not offer repair as a dualism with paranoia. Rather, she advocates in Fawaz’s words for an “agnostic openness” which “encourages us to loosen our commitments to any singular program of analysis and ask ourselves instead how our own desires, aspirations, fears, and anxieties might provide a key to new ways to read the culture we make and that, in turn, makes us.”<sup>27</sup> While she offers repair as a mode of reading, in the genealogy of queer and crip theorizing since, it has multiplied into reparative orientations, acts, and systems which mobilize themselves alongside and against paranoid practices.

Social justice-oriented spaces, particularly those run by crip elders, have long called for such modes of repair, emphasizing the prioritization of community safety over individual safety, present survival over assumed and sensationalized “future casualty,” and accountability over exposure. In compiling the #CripCOVIDSyllabus and participating in Princeton Mutual Aid, I was reminded of the centrality of mutual aid efforts and alternative modes of access to crip survival, a goal in its own right for those not intended to survive.<sup>28</sup> Disabled, Mad, fat, crip community members have released resource guides, mutual aid lists, survival tips, and guidelines on safe protesting and direct action which speak not only to those communities but also share lessons and expertise with normative able-bodied

folks in search of answers amid crises.<sup>29</sup> These communities have also shown that crip reparative work is meaningful in its context-specific, contingent, and localized world-building which forms part of a long history of practicing intimate and relational modes of care.<sup>30</sup> In my world, I have been lucky to receive support, ideas for action, food, and money from those around me, whether in the form of meal delivery when I am sad or sick, nudges to join protests when I am able, or company and comfort when it's what I need most.

These forms of reparative, present, and survival-oriented practices are not naïve gestures in the face of violence. As Dean Spade reminds us, mutual aid is "survival work" that is "done in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change."<sup>31</sup> Its aim is to "build and connect large-scale movements" but it is only "one tactic in the social movement ecosystem," operating "alongside direct action, political education, and many other tactics."<sup>32</sup> Reparative acts, which include mutual aid, pod-mapping, transformative justice, and other more informal forms of care-work, recognize that violence shapes the conditions of survival, that these conditions necessitate radical overhaul, and that reparative acts are one facet of the multiple modes of building towards that overhaul. The past few years have seen a resurgence and popularization of justice-driven abolitionist logics, thanks to the work of Black, brown, and disabled scholar-organizers like Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, adrienne maree brown, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Walidah Imarisha, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Mia Mingus.<sup>33</sup>

These theorists and activists and others like Alison Kafer have argued for futurity—particularly the persistence of queer and crip-of-color communities—as an essential political act, in contrast to "no-future," "death-drive" impetus of members of the movement.<sup>34</sup> They show how crip investments in care help create the possibilities for radical presents which help *facilitate* radical futures. Located in the present and working towards a future, crip, and abolitionist modes of caretaking and community-building also make room for the difficult work of mourning. Pain and grief, after all, are feelings that get repressed and ignored both by the inaction of paranoia and the reformism of neoliberal aid. As such, reparative work's endpoint is building a way out of the oppression that necessitates its existence.

However, repair too has its limits (here comes the paranoia again). As Patricia Stuelke contends in her provocative text *The Ruse of Repair*, this turn to care-work as one of many antidotes to paranoia "has a history, one that is inextricable from the cultural and social forms of US imperialism and anti-imperialism in the late twentieth century and concomitant rise of neoliberal racial capitalism."<sup>35</sup> She connects Sedgwick's critique of paranoid orientation to "a broader sensibility suffusing" political movements and academia in the 1990s as a response to the "failed struggle against" empire in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Operating from spaces of "emergency and exhaustion," Stuelke argues, activists, cultural

workers, and politicized individuals have sought relief in “dreams of compassionate connection and the reparative reconstitution of intimacy, family, and community across borders and racial and class divides.”<sup>37</sup>

This reparative mode, Stuelke continues, assumes a common understanding of oppression. In so doing, it obscures the oft-precarious labor of those who engage in modes of critique which actively expose these structures, instead producing a notion of kinship and care which ignores the various locational and positional fissures in community-formation. The critical stance against paranoia which rails against the legibility of structural violence risks obscuring the “labor of those activists, scholars, writers, and artists who worked hard to make and circulate that knowledge, as well as the degree to which the discourse of transparency effaces the methods of exposure central to their work.”<sup>38</sup> I do not claim to be such an activist or scholar, but I do know that I am exhausted of being told I “think too much” and am “looking for reasons to be anxious” by supposed coconspirators. Crip theory and organizing have been central to my lifework, and I am lucky to be in academic spaces where disability can be part of the conversation, but there remains this disjuncture between what is known in the abstract and what is known in practice.

Relatedly, appeals to treat oppression “as obvious and evident,” Stuelke says, “tend to overestimate the legibility of state and capitalist violence, as well as the extent to which understandings of that violence are known and shared.”<sup>39</sup> I have found in my own experience that “community” is a term which, as Mia Mingus cautions, comes with wildly different, often romanticized ideas on oneness which simply do not hold up when it comes to moments of crisis.<sup>40</sup> Particularly as large parts of “feminist,” “queer,” and even “mutual aid” communities that I am a part of begin their return to “normalcy,” it is apparent that the assumed “shared understanding” we had of the gravity of COVID and broader historical tensions around public health has diffused. Only a few non-disabled people in my world have paused to actually *materially* consider that the crises of the past few years have varying levels of impact—they “get it” in theory but don’t “get it” enough to demand anything different.

Even as we endlessly seek out and consume death tolls and case numbers, we seem to barely hold space to recognize what it *means* that a disproportionate section of the people these numbers represent are disabled and chronically ill. The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a prime-time television interview in January of 2022 said that 75% people who died of COVID “were unwell to begin with” which is “encouraging news in the context of Omicron,” implying that it was *positive* that “unhealthy” people are wiped out of the species pool while “normal,” “healthy” people remain safe.<sup>41</sup> Particularly given how access to both health-giving lives and life-giving healthcare have historically been shaped by racism, classism, imperialism, and fatphobia,

such a statement, as Matthew Cortland explains in a tweet, is plain “eugenicist.”<sup>42</sup> Disabled activists have been screaming hoarse about the logics of disposability brought to the fore not only by COVID, but also long before.<sup>43</sup> Yet, most triage procedures, “post-COVID” policies, and medical rationing guidelines pertaining specifically to disability have gone unquestioned in some of the non-disabled activist spaces I occupy. As the world “re-opens,” my and others’ attempts for the kinds of hybrid or remote access that previously sustained our work and social lives are now largely met with frustration about the inconvenience they cause or how they disrupt the aims of the spaces we inhabit.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, calls for survival, mutual aid, and communal care rarely consider the transnational or translocal stakes involved in such a moment of crisis. COVID-19 is a *global* pandemic, and its impacts are *global*. Mutual aid and local support networks are laudable and essential, but as someone caught between two “homes” with differing resources, I am stuck between contributing to mutual aid efforts on the East Coast, where I have spent most of the pandemic, and being unable to really change the overwhelming resource-disparity, especially within redistributive networks in India, where I am from and where I conduct research. A friend, themselves disabled, was organizing ventilators for COVID-patients in Delhi in the midst of the Omicron spike in May 2021 and shared with me the impossibility of their work—“we’re often too late in meeting requests, and there are often too many to manage. I don’t know if I can keep doing this.” Later that summer, I looked through an excel sheet of mutual aid asks in New Jersey while on the phone with a family member, feeling the guilt rising as she told me how members of my family who are much more vulnerable to COVID-19 than me had to drive around Mumbai searching for vaccines, while I had received two doses and was awaiting my third. Global vaccine and resource inequity are, of course, functions of neoliberal empire and not about singular action; nevertheless, in the face of the scale of this crisis, a lot of calls to care and kinship feel hollow.

When I and disabled folks I follow on social media bemoan the “unmasked,” often with good reason, we emphasize reliance within our communities, producing an unwitting “insider” around the notion of “disabled” which is geographically and logistically bounded. Yet, as scholars at the intersections of disability and race have cautioned, access to disability identity is an impossibility for a variety of people, particularly in the Global South, whose bodies are considered disposable to begin with.<sup>45</sup> Mutual aid is intended to be a localized effort aimed at building broader solidarity. But in many academic and activist spaces, it seems to me that the radical promise of this vision is bounded by a desire for a shared imagined vocabulary and location. I want to assert that crip futurity is a radical end in and of itself, but I am continuously stuck wondering which crips’ futurity I am advocating for and to whom cripness remains foreclosed. My assertion becomes particularly difficult to

justify when many crips I know cannot or do not perform cripness, risk, or paranoia in the ways that I do.

Gatekeeping, which I am guilty of, presents a problem in so many of the pods, spaces, and communities I inhabit, premised on the paranoid judgements and performances of caution that immediately sequester attempts to bring people into the fold. My “pod,” meant to be the group of people I rely on in moments of trauma or danger, is geographically spread out, limited by distance and unable to jump to action when necessary. My hyper-mobility, which is tied to immigration and precarity, and yet simultaneously a privilege, has often prevented me from even joining in on efforts which require a sense of place that I do not have. In Princeton, Philadelphia, and Boston, where I have spent the past few years, the very people who can benefit from reparative engagements are often absent in these spaces because many collectives rely on shared social networks. Stuelke argues that “the feel-good fix that the reparative offers hasn’t yet freed, and in fact cannot free, everyone from state and racial capitalist violence, even though sometimes . . . the opposite feels true.”<sup>46</sup> I want to celebrate the moments of joy and care emerging, against all odds, during this crisis. But existing between two unequal locations sometimes makes that feel like a contradiction in terms.

## Ambivalence—Keep Breathing—Towards a New Crip Affect

So where does that leave me, leave us? Tired of paranoia, critical of repair, attempting to embrace both and neither? What is a possible ethical, political, radical, crip affect to inhabit? An answer I want to argue for is “ambivalence,” an affect that I consider crip and that I am slowly teaching myself to inhabit. There is undoubtedly room for paranoia.

Paranoia, in Ngai’s words, “does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully.”<sup>47</sup> Interpersonally, it has kept me somewhat safe. However, paranoia can disarm possibilities for meaningful, if limited, connection, deepening our investments in neoliberal individual forms of care and our disinvestments from state and community apparatuses. It can and has led to inaction, to pure imagination, to critique with no end, to an endless retroactive, reactionary anxiety. Repair offers relief, but this relief has its limits. While pleasure and amelioration, as Sedgwick cautions, are not “mere” political goals, they can lead to a desire to think only *within* certain inaccessible borders and histories.

Ambivalence, as I see it, is Sedgwickian in its messiness and its axiomatic modality, but departs from the reparative mode in its emphasis on embodiment and feeling, perpetually incomplete temporal orientations, and its acceptance, even welcome, of complicity as a site for political energy. My thinking with ambivalence draws on neuroqueer theorist Merri

Lisa Johnson, writing scholar Hillery Glasby, and artist-theorist Caitlin Merrett King, building on their words and bringing in the modes of relationality I have learned from a long line of Black and Third World feminists both within the academy and within my home(s).

Johnson theorizes the inhabiting of neurodivergence as a political imperative, positing “pain-centric” work as method.<sup>48</sup> Ambivalence, to me, is pain-centric in its recognition of pain as an inevitable, central, and productive political tool, which can necessitate critical exposé and communal care but probably cannot be encompassed, fixed, or even understood by either. Rather than turn pain into paranoia (*everyone around me is trying to get me sick*) or attempting to reduce pain (*a few small things I do can stop other people from getting sick*), ambivalence allows for wallowing, languishing, and embodying (*I don’t want to be sick or want others to be sick and I will work towards that but I will probably fail and that is okay. I should try again. I know I am not doing enough, but regardless I have to do what I can, and that can be taking care of myself. But also, this could all be wrong, so convince me otherwise*). The length of ambivalence, what Merrett King calls its “hedging” and “excess,” might seem to be politically inefficient, but instead, it offers sustainable political action, working *with* rather than *through* tiredness. Unlike what queer studies scholar Ellis Hanson calls the “depressive position” of paranoia and repair, which occasionally position the feeler as judge or martyr, ambivalence occupies sitting on the fence as a political mode—ready for action but also ready for retreat.<sup>49</sup> It rids itself of the self-righteousness of an end-point, of either optimism for the future or pessimism for the past, resting instead on *doing what one can, when one can, even when one doesn’t believe it will make a difference* as a strategic, sustainable, and crip affect. “Ambivalence draws its energy from a state of being unresolved, enmeshed, disoriented,” writes Glasby, calling for an unfinished product—or in my case an undecided temporal orientation—as part of the impetus to inhabit contradiction as epistemology.<sup>50</sup>

Ambivalence, as Merrett King unpacks in her essay, is distinct from other affects in its (empathetic) recognition of complicity. Instead of self-flagellating for being imbricated in power, or relying on the catharsis of hope, futurity, and survival, ambivalence is “both amoral and moral, and *noncathartic* and *cathartic*.”<sup>51</sup> Ambivalence, or what she calls “Unsure Theory,” “fails itself,” “it is anti-capitalist yet complicit; at odds with the academy yet crouched here in this Special Issue.”<sup>52</sup> I would like to add here that a key feature of navigating complicity is that a consideration of strategy is essential to embodying ambivalence. One deploys affect based on the situation, but does not have to commit to it, and one is likely to make mistakes. Third World, Black, and transnational feminists like Chela Sandoval, the Combahee River Collective, and Chandra Mohanty have long shown pathways into thinking beyond monoliths and operating from the uncertain.<sup>53</sup> They argue against reaction, pushing instead for ambiguity and an awareness of one’s limitations, continual examination and self-criticism, and the forging of community as praxis rather

than through assumption. They further advocate that ideological stands be adopted, as Sandoval states, by reading “the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations.”<sup>54</sup> These positions, and the complicated positionalities they emerge from, produce axiomatic, contradictory affects which center retroactive critique, present care, radical futurity, and, fundamentally, solidarity, with an array of “my” and “not-my” people. They lead us to think widely and messily and to accommodate disagreement (within one’s community and oneself). As Merrett King concludes, “this attempt to do it all, to have my cake and eat it too, to be critical, accessible and complicit with capitalism, then critical of that complicity for an audience” pushes “towards a non-neoliberal, personal but not individual, unsure polyphonic choir of hedgy voices.”<sup>55</sup>

What makes ambivalence crip is an investment in the idea that, in Kafer’s definition, “crip” itself is the “promise” of a “we” rather than a “fact,” a statement that I read as a challenge to consider complicity, hope, action, and rest, all within the same frame.<sup>56</sup> In our new pandemic world, I aspire for ambivalence to mean a commitment to care, a continuity of mutual aid, an openness to people joining our movements, a skepticism of everything around us, a continuous frustration with contemporary crises, and, if it all gets to be too much, a nap at 2:00 p.m. I am aiming to make and unmake my commitment to questioning, aiming to breathe in paranoia and breathe out repair, and then to do it the other way, as this myriad panoply of strategies, affects, actions, and temporalities linger, unsettled, just under the skin.

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## Notes

1. For an overview of affect, please see Doris Bachmann-Medick and Frederik Tygstrup, eds., *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture* (New York: De Gruyter, 2015). ↩
2. Caitlin Merrett King, “Unsure Theory: Ambivalence as Methodology,” *Arts* 11, no. 4 (August 2022): 78, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11040078> < <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11040078>>. ↩



3. Mel Y. Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (June 1, 2011): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1163400> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1163400>> . ↵
4. Nikolas Rose, "The Politics of Life Itself," *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 6 (December 2001): 18, 22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760122052020> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760122052020>> . ↵
5. Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," 194; Rose, "The Politics of Life Itself," 6. ↵
6. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 126, 130. Sedgwick, often considered one of the foremost theorists in queer studies, has written broadly on psychoanalysis and literary criticism to speak to the various gendered and heterosexual lenses we deploy in reading and engaging with the world. Her critique of paranoia forms part of her critique of extant modes of cultural criticism and their limits. ↵
7. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 124. ↵
8. Ramzi Fawaz, "An Open Mesh of Possibilities: The Necessity of Eve Sedgwick in Dark Times," in *Reading Sedgwick*, ed. Lauren Gail Berlant (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 7. ↵
9. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 124, 146. ↵
10. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 146. ↵
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Jiya Pandya is a PhD candidate at Princeton University in the Department of History and the Program in Gender & Sexuality Studies. Her doctoral research focuses on the analogous deployment of and intersections between caste and disability in social work and welfare spaces in postcolonial India. She is invested in telling material and intellectual histories of disability from the Global South and in teaching critical feminist, crip, and queer theory, South Asian history, and global histories of gender, race, and disability. She serves on the boards of the Disability History Association and Asian Americans with Disabilities Initiative, and is a member of the Remote Access Project for the Critical Design Lab.

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## Article details

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## The Queer Aut of Failure: Cripistemic Openings for Postgraduate Life

by [sarah] Cavar | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** I, a Mad, autistic, multiply-disabled person, began my PhD in Cultural Studies in September of 2020. I started to make my home in graduate school during the COVID-19 pandemic, fully online, and I've excelled, calling into question normative assumptions of in-person socialization, education, and collaboration as superior to their virtual counterparts. In this article, I reflect on the cripistemic *pedagogies of failure* that facilitated a neuroqueered and *transMaddened* transition to Zoom-based graduate life. I will also consider email, text messages, and video calls as equalizing mediums in which both formal *and* fugitive spaces can open for queercrip collaboration across borders, timezones, and access needs. Lastly, I will tell the stories of technological "failures" that I have experienced—miscommunications, failing internet, time delays—as generative possibilities rather than indictments of a non-normative learning. Necessarily imperfect and rife with humorous, intriguing, and profoundly human failures, as well as surprising and generative openings, pandemic education has ushered in new queercrip, transMad, ways of knowing and teaching that have uniquely benefitted me. Far from a circumscribed or lacking educational landscape, I argue, post-COVID academia is filled with pedagogical and epistemological openings, holes through which new disabled and Mad scholars, myself included, can make ourselves a beautifully imperfect home space. I invite you inside.

**KEYWORDS** disability, crip, pedagogy, neurodivergence, madness

I was an undergraduate in the doomed class of 2020, perhaps the most apologized-to demographic between March and May of 2020. By midsummer, we 2020 grads had worn out our collective grief, senior spring lost to a mysterious, deadly contagion, and I was thrilled at the arrival of some semblance of emotional solitude alongside my mailed Bachelor of Arts degree. Yet that solitude, if that was what to call that slight lull in presumed emotional devastation, would not last. In August, 2020, I moved from my childhood home in rural Connecticut, where I'd been living as a pandemic-recluse, to Davis, California, where I would begin my PhD coursework in Cultural Studies.

My courses that year were, of course, entirely online. So were my orientations, colloquia, and other events. My then-new roommate ended up spending most of the school year attending class from home, paying her half of the rent from afar while I remained in the apartment alone. With the exception of a handful of outdoor meetings with a member of my cohort who had also moved to Davis despite our virtual-only plans, I saw none of my program faculty nor any of my peers in person that year. I saw few students and faculty of any program, and when I did, it was mostly in passing, during my periodic treks to the Student Health Center for two tubes of testosterone gel in a brown paper bag (testosterone is considered a “controlled substance” and cannot be mailed). Apart from my outings to Student Health, the grocery store, and the post office, I was alone. My academic career was born shouting “can you hear me now?!” into a toasty laptop. Delivered to me coated in hand sanitizer.

With this development, the apologies crescendoed. Whereas I had previously been incredibly proud of my acceptance to the program, having overcome numerous barriers to be the first in my family to pursue a doctoral degree, I quickly learned that the proper response to the timing of my acceptance was not pride, but chagrin.<sup>1</sup> Yes, I was indeed a real PhD student. But I was a real PhD student whose realness remained contingent, in a state of not-quite not unlike the not-quiteness of my undergraduate graduation, for which I also received numerous apologies. It seemed I should have been grieving, that to be happy with Zoom University was an undesirable, even repulsive response. I had an acceptance, just as I had a diploma, and yet the spatiotemporal delay in which I was experiencing these realities—one form of what Ellen Samuels calls “crip time”—alone warranted a widespread, unsolicited, negative response.<sup>2</sup>

## Two Types of Apologies I Have Received on Behalf of Zoom University

The presumed-response, grounded in neurotypical, abled, healthy, and sane norms around “acceptable” behavior and “reasonable” stimulus reaction, is always and already ableist. The two particular genres of apology I encountered in this specific case will be familiar to many disabled readers: pity and obliviousness. The former comes in the patronizing drone of the Nice Lady Therapist,<sup>3</sup> whose simpering sweetness belies a commitment to dehumanization, and the latter in the refreshingly crass (though not necessarily desired) scoff of the Surprised Dude.

1. “Oh, I can’t even imagine. Oh, honey, that must be so tough.”

2. “Oh, *dude*. Fuck. I didn’t even think about — whoa, that’s a lot.”

I began to say, "It, uh, *is what it is*," in response to both the patronizing tone of (1) and stumbling, overcompensatory apologies of (2). This went over reasonably well; had people nodding in what I can only assume was a mixture of sympathy and pity and a little bit of scorn. *Imagine being the weird kid who decides to come straight to grad school in the middle of a pandemic!* I could hear them thinking, whether they expressed it with bald-faced pity or honest shock. Call that a "temporarily regained theory-of-mind" if you'd like.<sup>4</sup> I call it "knowing that, if Zoom University is the joke, then I am the punchline."

Then, there's response three, which is not an apology, and which I am going to pretend that you, the reader of this volume, have offered me in response to the information I have just disclosed:

3. "Oh, that's right. How's it been going? What do you think so far?"

This is, by far, the best response, because it doesn't prescribe me an already-expected, chagrined response. It does not force me to act a part I do not believe in. Because truthfully, Zoom University is "actually pretty fine." I "actually kinda like it better than 'regular' school—not everything, of course, but it does offer me opportunities I wouldn't have IRL [in real life], you know?" And disabled colleagues nod, yes, I do know, and nondisabled colleagues also nod, if only out of politeness.

Don't get me wrong: Zoom PhD work is a failing enterprise. That is to say, it is a queercrip, transMad enterprise, which is to say, it is a beautiful, beautiful project. Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware describe such "fortunate failures" in the context of "curricular cripistemologies."<sup>5</sup> Coined by Merri Lisa Johnson, the term "cripistemologies," refers to "embodied ways of knowing in relation, knowing-with, knowing-alongside, knowing-across-difference, and unknowing," ways which frequently exist outside the purview of mainstream academia.<sup>6</sup> *Curricular* cripistemologies, then, refer to an intentional, queercrip deviation from normative pedagogical approaches which trades the corrective impulse of "special ed" and other rehabilitative programs, and offers instead a generative noncompliance.<sup>7</sup> That is, rather than trying to identify, isolate, and ameliorate difference, curricular cripistemologies lean into difference as it is experienced by disabled students ourselves, querying how atmospheres of in/accessibility shape normative approaches to education and how the embrace of "failure," not as a last-resort but as a first choice, poses potentially transformative possibilities.

I first learned about Zoom about a year prior to the pandemic, when I began doing research with Dr. Alexandre Baril, of the University of Ottawa, from my home-base in Western Massachusetts. He had suggested Zoom ("it's like Skype, but glitches less") for an early meeting, and using it felt intuitive, if slightly obscure. No one around me had heard of it before, and, apart from rare video meetings with Dr. Baril, I didn't use it. In March of 2020, I



felt relieved to have had some exposure to the new intellectual/social hub-of-choice. I was already well-versed in remote research and collaboration, to “resorting” to the choppy and awkward medium of the visual call to engage in what “ought” (I was told) to be in-person conversation. As that weird, frightening COVID spring continued, I continued my research, working on a full-length creative project, an undergraduate honors thesis, and my project with Dr. Baril, the last of which would extend through the summer. For those months, my life followed a predictable, quiet routine: I would wake, make (too much) coffee, work, and read for pleasure. I would make a simple meal and then go on a walk around my neighborhood, which, in my hometown, was deserted enough to wander without a mask. Once home, I would take a hot shower, and then say hello to my mother when she arrived home from her (essential) job as the manager of a pharmacy. I worked and read into the night, a practice I later had to cease for the sake of my sleep schedule. It was a cloistered life, a privileged life, and a very small life. It was a life infused, yes, with overwhelming anxiety and deep, deep sadness, both of which lapped the edges of my consciousness (and sometimes overwhelmed it). It was a life in which my Madness, no longer concealed for the sake of decorum, emerged in its myriad Behaviors (if I am Mad, and only I can hear it, do I make a sound?). Yet it was also an expansive life, and my bodymind followed the patterns I had established in earlier periods of imposed limitation on what is possible: it squeezes, seizes, and wends its way through cracks in the “possible,” a pencil mark following a maze. I am best when I am left to my own devices. I will see new things with myself.

By the start of the academic year, I was used to being crazy and alone: this pair of words did not signify defeat for me, and I did not feel pathetic, but excited: I emailed professors, and even spoke to one on the phone. I set up my desk, perpendicular to the window, so that I could learn all day by natural light. My enthusiasm did not deflate upon my institutional introduction to this very “unprecedented” first year in these very “unprecedented” times. But the myriad apologies I received in response to the program’s failing, flagging, faltering educational plans—including from faculty and fellow students—began to feel akin to a doctor’s prognosis: you have a PhD program, and it isn’t looking good.

Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*—to which this essay owes its title—queerly (re)defines failure as “ways of being and knowing that stand outside conventional understandings of success.”<sup>8</sup> University discourse tends to paint Zoom University (ZU) as a failure, and, by extension, understands its practitioners to be failures, too. Professors told us from their little Zoom boxes, “everything sucks, just do what you can” (something I now also tell my current students, albeit from the front of a too-crowded in-person classroom), implying that, among myriad forms of violence embedded in life since COVID, “inferior” knowledges generated online counted among them. No one seems to be clear on what,

exactly, “inferior” means; the term seems readily moldable to whatever content digital spaces produce. In truth, I do not know where, exactly, Zoom invariably fails that the irl classroom succeeds at, apart from marginalizing particular groups of students—perhaps that, in and of itself, is deemed success. Regardless, the caveat, “well, it’s not the same as in-person . . . ” lifts heavy—application says it must bear twenty-five pounds or more—and turns into commonsense.

Halberstam’s call to look more closely at failure does not apply only to the thing that has failed, but also, and even primarily, to the societal mechanisms that produce success. When we fail, queerly, we might gaze at commonsensical assumptions from the underbelly of the beast. Parents of schoolchildren learned to ask, “why *can’t* I feed my child during class, why can’t my child eat in their own home?” Draconian policies policing childrens’ bodily functions were exposed in all their cruel absurdity in attempts to enforce them online. Failures of/to discipline poked holes in a carceral educational apparatus. Switching to Zoom made apparent pedagogical and epistemological holes previously concealed in in-person learning: an unnecessary reliance on face-to-face, synchronous instruction, which proved especially inadequate for some d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, whose IRL worlds do not come with instant captions. Ableist norms around verbal participation as a barometer for student competence proved insufficient, as reactions and chats—not to mention the informal, cripistemological backchannels through which I had and have engaging conversations with “silent” peers—opened us to new ways of *being and knowing* together.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes, technologies *did* fail in that more typical way—in other words, they crapped out. In the summer of 2021, I took an online writing workshop, during which I was booted from Zoom several times for spontaneous software updates and internet lapses. I did not learn where the “raise hand” emoji was until the middle of that first year, meaning that I Zoomed in a patently autistic style: poorly estimating natural conversational pauses, cutting in at inopportune moments, circling “backward” to points amid desire for conversational progress. I was frequently overwhelmed by the desire to intervene in a conversation, to follow my thought-train for minutes or paragraphs. While I sometimes stumbled in verbally expressing my racing thoughts—you try reading accurately from a speeding train car!—I quickly found a refuge in the chat function, and even in texting classmates outside the Zoom app. In an especially generative class, I’d be writing emails, cross-referencing readings, and in multiple text/Zoom chat conversations at the same time. While I (and my lagging internet) didn’t always time my verbal interventions correctly, the new modes of communication Zoom afforded me were eye-opening. I wouldn’t even describe them as “making up for” some “lost” IRL communication. I have no truck with discourses of lack.<sup>10</sup> Zoom’s particular communicative functions simply entered my life and opened some doors.

In short, Zoom's neuroqueer(ed) functionalities facilitated my own communicative abilities, not by normalizing them in accordance with existing standards, but providing entirely new and entirely necessary paths. Functioning means something different on Zoom. Think about phrases like, "use the chat function," or "use the hand-raise function." These are functions which facilitate access for those deemed typically "nonfunctional." For example, philosophy PhD student Jennifer Nicole Foster (@philoso\_foster) tweets:

if this last year on Zoom has taught me anything it's that running participant chats dramatically improve Q&As and I hope we continue to use them in in-person talks

the collaborativeness—"yeah, like X says in the chat"; the crowdsourcing citations, the chance to clarify or mention something that's not worth a full "hand", the ability to \*get\* something clarified without distracting the speaker, the increased accessibility—it's just so good.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, scholar and activist Cy (@jillianweise) tweeted, in response to a question about how others had changed throughout the pandemic, "I wasn't myself on social [media] until July 2020. The pandemic coerced me into being 'myself' instead of heteronym, pseudonym, anon acct. So it was kinda like not existing. And I did it for safety reasons. It was fine."<sup>12</sup> In both instances, what was understood pre-pandemic to constitute "real life" failed to accomplish its stated aim: realness. Foster's account points to the emergence of genuine and committed participation in the learning process via Zoom specifically, as well as a newfound ability to ask questions and enter into scholarly dialogues previously inaccessible. For Cy, the jump from "real" to "virtual" life facilitated self-realization on social media, the removal of barriers between the self Cy lived offline and the self Cy was online. While the linear progression from anonymous online account to one featuring "real" personal details is not always needed or desired. For many, the fusion of the online and offline worlds shifted the terrain of the real and facilitated newfound crip authenticities.

As a Mad, autistic scholar, I am a collector. No. I am more ragged than a collector. I am what rhetorician and poet-educator Stacey Waite termed a "scavenger." Scavenging, Waite explains, is a practice with the ability to "[disrupt] ways of knowing that seem dominant, taken for granted, or obvious and by valuing contradiction—what we might also call messiness, fragmentation, or even confusion."<sup>13</sup> When Zoom glitches, when our professor freezes and then winks off the screen, I get to know my classmates in ways impossible IRL. We joke in the chat; voices that had until now not spoken up ask the professor's name in hesitant tones. In the chat, I explain a word to someone unfamiliar with the field; a friend sends the link to a related article I might like. Sometimes we undertalk whole conversations—how's your family, your partner, your work? I scavenge, pluck details and citations from lectures and discussions, stringing them together in the cripistemic backchannels of Zoom, Messenger, social media. When my camera is off, I write a poem. I mute myself and everyone else when the noise is just-too-much, and I sit and watch ten little mouths move

in silence, gathering what is said from intermittent messages and screen-shared slides. Sometimes I miss things, though I miss less than I did when bombarded by unwanted sound. More often, on Zoom, I miss nothing. I gain.

Once, when the Zoom app failed on me mid-class, a friend and colleague relayed to me the contents of the class discussion via text. "We all miss you," she said, and I missed them all, because I had been excited about the topic. I ultimately intervened via text, secondhand, my classmate copying and pasting my texts into the group chat and letting me know what others responded. When Zoom queers, crips, craps out on us, losing its characteristic functionalities, it offers us opportunities, too—opportunities regularly penalized and vilified in the IRL classroom. While crucial in an environment of inevitable tech-failure, these alternatives are also not mere opportunities to turn "failure" into "success." They are ways to locate in failure precious intimacies, surrogacies of thought and emotion, delicate cripistemological in(ter)ventions.

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Above, I use the word "functionalities" deliberately, in order to draw attention to discourses of functioning that continue to pervade popular understandings of autism, and of mental disability in broad terms. These discourses, even more commonsensical than those aforementioned COVID caveats, render the "low-functioning" disabled person, less able to comply with the demands of neoliberal capitalism, as an inferior class of person to their high-functioning (and conditionally compliant) counterparts. The logics of functioning labels are entirely contingent upon this conditional compliance: the high-functioning autistic moves toward *indistinguishability from (our) peers* (that is, toward erasure),<sup>14</sup> and generates value—social and material—accordingly. That is, the high-functioning autistic is one deemed capable of making profits and friends. The low-functioning autistic, in contrast, may be expelled from the realm of the adult and of the human entirely, marked as dependent on, and thus subordinate to, others in their midst. This is the boogeyman imagined by Autism Speaks and other eugenic campaigns against autistic life: the low-functioning and visibly disabled autistic is imagined as "stolen" or "possessed" by a disease exiling them from *real life*.<sup>15</sup> Chillingly, this depiction of autistics as possessed and unreal have become conceptual shortcuts for justifying our murder.<sup>16</sup>

While eugenics is the inarguable *raison d'être* for marking persons as "low-functioning," a subtler, yet still deeply harmful, annihilationist rhetoric also accompanies functioning label discourse, one that I choose to map onto my myriad Zoom U apologies. That is, it is important to remember that we who are marked as "high-functioning" are marked as such aspirationally. If "disability" is constructed primarily through associations of negativity and

lack, one might consider the “low-functioning” subject to embody that imagined lack, and the “high-functioning” subject to be laboring in a continuous attempt to disavow it. Conscious attempts on our behalf to do so are known as “masking,” a term that has, since March 2020, elicited some darkly-humorous confusion.<sup>17</sup> Masking, in essence, is the concealment of visibly-neurodivergent (and specifically autistic) behavior in an attempt at “passing” in(to) social contexts in which it is not safe or beneficial to be neurodivergent. We learn to mask particular behaviors out of survival or preference, usually a combination of the two. Masking, like other methods of “passing,” is not a marker of privilege but an indication of embodied danger. A life lived masking is a life on the edge, a life spent fleeing classrooms for “bathroom breaks” during a sensory trigger, of making myself a muzzle when I get the urge to infodump. Of sitting on my hands. Of cringing cringe<sup>18</sup> cringe—

And perhaps at some point they—we—have shown ourselves to be passable as weird neurotypicals rather than disorderly autistics. Maybe we have spent our lives pushing ourselves into spaces where we don’t quite fit, making-do with our discomfort (I am trying to slam the fridge closed but there is too much inside!). Those of us who are not professionally diagnosed, or who were, like myself, diagnosed as adults, lived this squeezing-passing life without even knowing it. Others are subjected to abusive therapy in an attempt to traumatize them into compliance. We are, regardless, inconveniences, missed stitches in the fabric of social (and classroom) life. Too quiet, too loud, inappropriate, and off-topic. Our “high-functionality” is not a compliment, but a threat: it rests upon the presumption that our autistic attributes might be educated, trained out of us. That within the four brick walls of the (educational) institution, we, too, might graduate from autistic life to *real* life, where peeing is a privilege we must beg for and we must raise our hands to speak. That there is no stimming in the classroom, no side-conversations, and certainly no breaks. We were to be here, now, all the time, dough pounded to (com)pliance.

When my graduate program floated the idea of continuing virtual colloquia into the 2021–22 academic year, my hand was the first in the air to argue in its favor. I had been sitting for close to two hours in an introductory meeting, my first in-person since the start of my program. Shoes clicked against the floor; someone near me clicked their pen. The meeting would, I knew, end later than the scheduled time, but when? I didn’t know, and the unknowing nauseated me. *With this nausea, what will I do at lunch?* I had asked myself, listening to several staff set up our catered meal in the next room. My heart began to pound. My hands, to shake. Midway, I had left for the bathroom. I was sure I could hear someone behind me, following me, as if to accuse me of everything I was.

“The virtual colloquia are so much more accessible,” I told the people in my program. Someone was still clicking their pen. I felt slightly lightheaded. “I mean, I know as someone

who is pretty noise-sensitive, I appreciate having other attendees muted when the presentation is happening, and having the ability to adjust the speaker's volume myself. Plus, I'm able to move around and take breaks without disrupting anything. And if any of us gets sick or hurt, we'd be able to watch from home.

"It's a win-win for everyone," I concluded redundantly.

Nods all around, though the only other person who spoke up was a friend and fellow queercrip, over-talker, and talker-over. Through two layers of masks, they, immunocompromised, echoed all I'd said. We talked about critical disability studies at the subsequent lunch, with ample space between our bodies, our mouths sporting salty rings of perspiration.

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In the summer of 2021, during that brief, early period of post-vaccine freedom, there came a spate of articles all anxious about "our" return to school, to work, to *real life*. Writers and commenters feared a regression in their social skills, a newfound inability to cope with the demands of the office or classroom given their new awareness of other possibilities. I overhear the phrase, "I don't know how to talk to people anymore," as I walk, alienated, down physical hallways crowded with students. In this tender period, they are like me: small, wiry colts on quaking feet.

These new people are easier to talk to. These new people are a little more queercrip than they were before. This is in part due to the magnitude of collective trauma to which we have been exposed since March 2020, new and renewed caregiving responsibilities, and, for many, their first-ever encounters with medical abuse and neglect. It is also, in part, due to the transformed modality through which we learned to communicate, a Zoomed-in one which allows side-chats, hand-raises, mute and off-camera functions. Zoom has restructured our interactions in ways conducive to increased neurodiversity, simply by adding more communicative channels. It provided us, too, with a common language for discussing accommodations previously unimaginable: Why not attend from home? Why limit participation to verbal speech alone? Why must my body be *in* a space in order to be *of* it?

I explain: Sometimes, everything happens too much. *Classrooms suffused with pesky particles prove toxic, dangerous, and even deadly. Even absent COVID, the sights and sounds and smells of collective study prove unbearable. In my in-person classes today, I wish, sometimes, to mute it all.* I've found myself itching for the chat function in a particularly generative class, wanting to instantly send out a referenced text. I explain to

skeptics the way that Zoom worked for me, the exponential increase in my ability to “network” as a graduate student once networking could be done remotely, and now that myself and my abled, neurotypical counterparts could meet on virtual common-ground.

Zoom keeps me *me*.  
Zoom makes me / (more) autistic.  
That is, Zoom keeps me / autistic.

I celebrate a shift to virtual learning not in spite of its failures, but because of them: these failures allow us to better engage with the cracks in normative educational practice, not only because they become more visible, but because many astute crip-critics now have greater access to the means of knowledge-production and academic discourse. If my entering a PhD program meant entering, as a participant, an ongoing scholarly conversation, then Zoom University failed me in the very best way: inside the impossibility of “real” graduate school was the possibility of intellectual transformation. Failure can be possibility. Anyone can fail, because anyone is possible.<sup>19</sup>

Today, despite our halting return to “real-life” class, I pursue not only the collaborative possibilities occasioned by the pandemic specifically, but also those which our Zoomified circumstances have made available. A longtime social media acquaintance, Ulysses C. Bougie, and I became friends and collaborators and kinda-sorta-queer-quoi-aro<sup>20</sup> online date(?)mates. We teach and learn not through texts, but through *texts*: “not standard, MLA-formatted 8.5 × 11 sheets of paper (whether tangible or digital)”<sup>21</sup> but midnight blue-bubbled infodumps, unwieldy voice memos, or the occasional voice/video call. We have taken this new normal(ization) of long-distance scholarship and made scholarly coupledness. In my own teaching, I have destabilized my own prioritization of verbal participation in class discussion, allowing students to earn participation credit by uploading their notes to a class Google Drive, a practice which also allows students absent from class not to fall behind. As a student, I continue to fire off messages related to classroom discussion, though off Zoom, it *isn’t quite the same*.

I still hold my office hours online, and people visit, because now, to visit is not to plod anxiously across campus, but simply to click a link. I hope at some point to teach entirely online, where I can sit comfortably with my students / knowing  
they learn behind my back.

For now, I will let students, armed with pre-typed questions, into my personal meeting room. They fear they will not pass (through) the course—the year—the architecture that seeks to fix them. They will attempt to compensate for what they have learned to perceive as *lack*: the “inferiority” of Zoom and the connections made with it, the “inadequacy” of the social and intellectual projects fostered in a virtual environment. And above all, they are so, so sorry for asking too much of me, as we navigate together new ways of teaching and

learning. They will barrel through their lists, apologizing, *sorry if that's too much*. In reply, I tell them, "Thanks for coming. I'm so glad you're here."

## Notes

1. Here, I refer to obstacles—financial, material, social—placed in my way by cisheteropatriarchal, ableist, capitalist systems that seek intentionally to fail marginalized people. I refuse to participate in a "supercrip" (see Clare) discourse of personal achievement that elides the human-made nature of our inaccessible world. Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). ↵
2. Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824>. ↵
3. Mel Baggs, "Nice Lady Therapists and Their War against Human Emotion: Class, Disability, and Culture," *Cussin' and Discussin'*, June 7, 2018, <https://cussinanddiscussin.wordpress.com/2018/05/04/nice-lady-therapists-and-their-war-against-human-emotion-class-disability-and-culture/>. ↵
4. In *Authoring Autism*, M. Remi Yergeau further discusses autistic theory-of-mind (namely, the presumption that autistic people are pathologically self-centered and unable to understand others' feelings and motivations) in relation to rhetoric. An autistic rhetorician themselves, Yergeau keeps their tongue planted firmly in their cheek. M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). ↵
5. David T. Mitchell, Sharon L. Snyder, and Linda Ware, "'{Every} Child Left Behind': Curricular Cripistemologies and the Crip/Queer Art of Failure," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 297. ↵
6. Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, "Introduction: Cripistemologies and the Masturbating Girl," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 254. ↵
7. Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware, "{Every} Child Left Behind," 297–298. ↵
8. Jack Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2. ↵
9. For further discussion of queercrip approaches to "class participation," see Stacey Waite, "Andy Teaches Me to Listen: Queer Silence and the Problem of Participation," *Writing on the Edge* 24, no. 1 (2013): 63–74. ↵
10. Critiques of disabled bodyminds as inherently "lacking" in comparison to our abled counterparts are foundational to disability studies. See Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, "Feminist Disability Studies," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 2 (2005): 1557. ↵
11. Jennifer Nicole Foster, Twitter, June 29, 2021, 4:22pm. [https://twitter.com/philoso\\_foster/status/1409970565721432067?s=20](https://twitter.com/philoso_foster/status/1409970565721432067?s=20) < [https://twitter.com/philoso\\_foster/status/1409970565721432067?s=20](https://twitter.com/philoso_foster/status/1409970565721432067?s=20) >. ↵
12. @jillianweise, Twitter, August 16, 2021, now deleted. ↵
13. Stacey Waite. "Cultivating the Scavenger: A Queerer Feminist Future for Composition and Rhetoric," *Peitho Journal* 18, no. 1 (2015): 51. ↵
14. Shaun May, "On Silence and Autism," *Performance Research* 23, no. 4–5 (2018): 425–427, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1507716> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1507716> >. ↵
15. See Zephyr Ash Ostrowski, "Things Left Unsaid: 'I Am Autism 10 Years Later,'" September 13, 2019, <https://thinkingautismguide.com/2019/09/things-left-unsaid-i-am-autism-10-years.html>. ↵



16. See ASAN, "Anti-Filicide Toolkit," *Autistic Self Advocacy Network*, January 12, 2015. <https://autisticadvocacy.org/2015/01/2015-day-of-mourning-vigils> < <https://autisticadvocacy.org/2015/01/2015-day-of-mourning-vigils>> . ↩
  17. Ryan Boren, "Autistic Burnout: The Cost of Masking and Passing," *Ryan Boren*, January 26, 2017, <https://boren.blog/2017/01/26/autistic-burnout-the-cost-of-coping-and-passing> < <https://boren.blog/2017/01/26/autistic-burnout-the-cost-of-coping-and-passing>> . ↩
  18. Eden, "Cringe Culture Is Fundamentally Ableist," *Autisticats*, accessed December 17, 2021, [https://theautisticats.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/9/6/129686841/cringe\\_culture\\_is\\_fundamentally\\_a\\_bleist.pdf](https://theautisticats.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/9/6/129686841/cringe_culture_is_fundamentally_a_bleist.pdf) < [https://theautisticats.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/9/6/129686841/cringe\\_culture\\_is\\_fundamentally\\_a\\_bleist.pdf](https://theautisticats.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/9/6/129686841/cringe_culture_is_fundamentally_a_bleist.pdf)> . ↩
  19. I note that these "possibilities" might not qualify as generatively subversive or remotely desirable: they can and do include crisis, distress, and "lives gone haywire"; Merri Lisa Johnson, "Bad Romance: A Crip Feminist Critique of Queer Failure," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 264. ↩
  20. Our partnership rejects the typical delineation between "romantic" and "platonic," and indicates an overall disidentification with the category of romantic desire. For a detailed history of quoi, see Coyote, "Quoiro / WTFfromantic: A Brief Timeline of Disidentification with & Personal Rejection of Romantic Orientation," *The Ace Theist*, March 19, 2019, <https://theacetheist.wordpress.com/2019/01/04/quoiro-wtfromantic-a-brief-timeline-of-disidentification-with-personal-rejection-of-romantic-orientation/> < <https://theacetheist.wordpress.com/2019/01/04/quoiro-wtfromantic-a-brief-timeline-of-disidentification-with-personal-rejection-of-romantic-orientation/>> . Bougie further discusses aromantic creative production in "Composing Aromanticism," (master's thesis, University of Missouri, 2021), <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/85832> < <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/85832>> . ↩
  21. Hillery Glasby. "Making It Queer, Not Clear," *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods, Queer Projects* (Utah State University Press, 2019), 24. ↩
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## Article details

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## Roundtable: Crip Student Solidarity in the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Sohini Chatterjee, Keely Grossman, Rachel Jobson, Kristen Kowlessar and River Rossi | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** This roundtable shares the first-hand experiences of five crip, disabled, Mad, and/or neurodivergent doctoral students navigating academia in so-called Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. While we discuss and theorize our experiences of ableism, structural oppression, and inaccessibility in the academy, we also highlight the world-building experiences of solidarity that have emerged for us in crip community, and in particular among fellow crip graduate students. We consider the ways that crip students open up potential for new ways of learning and being by challenging dominant norms of academic productivity, and we also consider what is lost when these students are pushed out of academic spaces. By engaging in “collective refusal” of the conditions that harm disabled and otherwise marginalized students, new possibilities emerge for connection, community, and radical change. The virtual conversation transcribed here took place over Discord, email, and Google Docs in autumn of 2021 and early winter 2022. This piece embraces multi-tonality, that is, a range of different voices and ways of writing, speaking, and communicating. It is a conversational piece that intentionally blends varied approaches to knowledge-sharing: polemic, citationally-grounded, and personal anecdotes drawn from our diverse lived experiences. There are a number of different themes woven throughout the text, including anecdotes and personal history, solidarity, ableism in the academy, pessimism/failure, community/interdependence/intimacy, and utopia/futurity/demands for the future. While not intended to provide policy guidance or step-by-step instructions for changing academic culture, we also begin to sketch out some of our dreams for an alternative future for disabled scholars. We discuss imagined futures and possibilities, and ask, is a truly crip and/or accessible academic institution possible?

**KEYWORDS** solidarity, crip, academia, COVID-19, mad studies, graduate students, ableism, roundtable

The following is a lightly edited transcript of a virtual conversation that took place over Discord, email, and Google Docs in autumn of 2021 and early winter 2022. All five

participants are crip, disabled, Mad, and/or neurodivergent doctoral students navigating academia during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a roundtable, this piece embraces multi-tonality, that is: a range of different voices and ways of writing, speaking, and communicating. It is a conversational piece that intentionally blends varied approaches to knowledge-sharing: polemic, citationally-grounded, and personal anecdotes drawn from our diverse lived experiences. While not intended to provide policy guidance or step-by-step instructions for changing academic culture, we also begin to sketch out some of our dreams for an alternative future for disabled scholars. There are a number of different themes woven throughout the text, including anecdotes and personal history, solidarity, ableism in the academy, pessimism/failure, community/interdependence/intimacy, and utopia/futurity/demands for the future. Taking advantage of the virtual format, we use highlighting and comments in the margins of the [PDF version < https://ia904700.us.archive.org/21/items/Lateral11-2/Sohini%20Chatterjee%2C%20et%20al%2C%20%22Roundtable%20-%20Crip%20Student%20Solidarity%20in%20the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic%22%20-%20Lateral.pdf>](https://ia904700.us.archive.org/21/items/Lateral11-2/Sohini%20Chatterjee%2C%20et%20al%2C%20%22Roundtable%20-%20Crip%20Student%20Solidarity%20in%20the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic%22%20-%20Lateral.pdf) of this article to name and draw your attention to these various thematic concepts and ways of knowing as they emerge throughout the conversation.

**Rachel Jobson: The already oppressive emotional and physical terrain of academia is compounded by our personal experiences of navigating institutional and interpersonal ableism and saneism (often intersected with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression) within it, often intensifying the impacts of already exploitative research practices, increasing negative health outcomes, and fostering hostile atmospheres of isolation and disconnection. What role has crip/Mad/neurodivergent student solidarity played for you in navigating academia? How has this shifted due to COVID-19?**

**Kristen Kowlessar:** Crip/Mad/neurodivergent student solidarity became a lifeline that I wasn't expecting, especially during the thick of the pandemic. My academic experience and solidarities prior to this were largely in racialized/queer/neurodivergent spaces, but in October 2020 I was diagnosed with two chronic illnesses, and while it made a lot of things make sense for me, it was also a huge wake up call as to how inaccessible and, frankly, uncaring academia can be. I was navigating a new normal where my mind and body couldn't operate at the capacity I had been used to pushing myself to before, and the shift wherein I started to actually accept my own limitations and prioritize my mental and physical health seemed to give people the impression that I lacked a solid work ethic, which really made me second-guess my life in academia. Connecting with other students and seeing them practice such kindness and patience for themselves and others, and finally being given that grace myself, gave me hope when I was so, so close to the end of my rope. This solidarity was offered to me at the exact time that I needed it, and I'm so thankful to be

in a place now where I can offer that same understanding and patience to others. This space within academia has been healing and protective.

**Sohini Chatterjee:** I found my crip community while working for a student advocacy organization in my first year in graduate school during the pandemic when we were battling isolation in specific ways. We felt accessibility was not centered in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work, as disabled people are hardly represented in positions of power and are rarely allowed to occupy decision-making roles. As disabled graduate students, we wanted to push for accessibility at every turn. The meaning of accessibility for me changed owing to this space that we nurtured for/with each other. As someone who is queer, racialized, and lives with trauma-induced disabilities, it is only in the company of disabled, neurodivergent graduate students (who are also queer) that I feel seen, heard, and cared for. Disabled people experience casual cruelty in the everyday, which includes but is not limited to exclusionary rhetoric and gestures, abandonment, dismissal, inaccessibility, indifference, withdrawal/denial of affection and care, violence by virtue of neglect—I could go on. The threat of both violence and exclusion exists, most prominently, in spaces where ethics is not centered and disabled voices are either not heard or are silenced by the skepticism of non-disabled people. Advocacy spaces offered possibilities for me to witness disabled wisdom and agency, allowed me to learn from it, and made me whole. I was seen as both queer and neurodivergent. Solidarity came in the form of disabled students showing up and working towards making accessibility an intersectional issue and offering care in the process.

My own positionality and the crip kinship I have experienced in the form of disabled and neurodivergent student solidarity makes me think about accessibility as an everyday commitment during COVID-19 and beyond. When someone accuses me of being “slow,” my friend E jumps in and says, “She is on crip time.” When my neurodivergent friend ensures that they make care accessible for me even when they are grieving, I know that my courage to carry on and claim space is made up of moments when access to care is not arbitrarily denied and exclusion is not normalized. I am comforted by the knowledge that my difference is not undesirable because of this solidarity in the form of care. If I can take up space knowing my difference is critical and helps reimagine academia, advocacy, expertise, intellectual labor, and collaboration, it is because I have experienced solidarity as care and as affection (and sometimes as valuable difference). I am secure in this knowledge because I bear witness to the different ways in which my crip, Mad friends are navigating academia, battling academia’s rigid social and intellectual standards, creating new possibilities through everyday intimacies and resistances (and forging intimacies as resistance), and working towards disability revolution on the daily. This embodyminded knowledge is what we cultivate in community and this is what sustains us against the structural and everyday ableism and sanism of the world.

**RJ:** I like how you highlight the uncaring nature of academia, Kristen. So much of my own work is centered around care, and how care can be reimagined outside of the capitalist, institutional, and colonial boundaries we typically frame it in. I can't help but think of my own experiences in undergrad, when I first got really sick and was navigating an academic space that didn't leave much room for someone who couldn't keep up with the demands and deadlines of conventional academia. I had this one professor who was really committed to putting whatever supports I needed in place so I could finish my fourth year and graduate, without ever making me feel like a burden. And that little bit of extra care made all the difference. It not only influenced me in terms of allowing me to finish my studies, but also shaped my pedagogy and politics as a graduate student who now teaches undergraduate students. I don't know if this particular professor was disabled himself, but he made it clear to me that my capacity (or lack thereof) to keep up with the ableist demands of academia was not in any way a reflection of my capacity for doing important work. If I have one overarching goal for my time in academia, it is to be that person for others. It is my hope that we can move to a space where responding to access needs with wholehearted embrace becomes the rule, not the exception, but we are not there now, and in the interim, I know that having even one person who shows that kind of care can be transformative. While that experience with my undergrad prof does not necessarily fall into the category of *crip student* solidarity, it did set the foundation for my understanding of what solidarity can look like in practice now that I have returned to the academic world over a decade later. It shapes how I interact with my students, my classmates, and my colleagues.

**Keely Grossman:** My own idea of crip community has evolved over the years. I attended a residential school for the blind from age eleven to eighteen, where I would live from Sunday until Friday, coming home on weekends and holidays. During my time at the school for the blind, before I knew what "crip community" was, there were little ways we as students would try to build our own communities under an oppressive institutionalized system. My idea of crip community changed again when I started attending post-secondary and was surrounded by sighted people who I felt I couldn't relate to, and vice versa. As such, a friend from the school for the blind (who started post-secondary at the same time as me) and I built our own crip community with each other without even realizing it. We built community care together—albeit from afar as we both attended different universities—because we were both enduring academic ableism and struggles with mental health, while sharing similar academic goals and interests. For years, we were each other's crip community, and we supported each other virtually, utilizing the power of virtual connection before COVID-19 started to normalize it. While I had engaged with critical disability studies in both my undergraduate and master's research, when I started my PhD during the pandemic, I had the opportunity to take a critical disability studies class where I learned

more about disability identity, activism, Mad Studies, and other theoretical areas. In that class, I also learned about crip community as a concept and its significance.

Engaging with material in the critical disability studies class brought forth so many emotions: grief, joy, and healing to name a few. Growing up in an institutionalized context surrounded by peers who were also part of the blind and visually impaired community gave me an understanding of the power of community at a young age. I feel like in academia, without having the language to articulate it until I took the critical disability studies class, crip community has been something I've been longing for. In academia prior to my PhD, I have felt like I had to be apart from my disability, and from my disability identity, and my disability identity has been something I've grappled with and even resented. While taking the critical disability studies class asynchronously because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to share articles and concepts with my peers from the school for the blind, particularly my friend who I built my original crip community with for all those years. After taking that class, I was able to not only recognize that what my friend and I had built for each other was crip community, but also other instances of crip community/solidarity, like when a current colleague in academia texts me image descriptions of visuals I might otherwise miss in class or social situations. Most importantly though, the pandemic has highlighted different, more accessible ways of building community, and with the knowledge I have now, I strive to be a part of fostering crip community and solidarity both inside and outside academia.

**River Rossi:** The other day I was talking with a potential lover about needs that we each have and how/if they can be met in order for us to establish a sense of trust and connection in our relating. We do these check-ins because we want to co-create the relational trust necessary for us to be open, receptive, curious, and present in our potential relationship dynamic. While this is a common conversation many non-monogamous queers have about relating, this particular conversation traversed into a discussion about academia, pedagogy, solidarity, and the importance of establishing trauma-informed relating in all spheres of our daily lives. It really became clear to me how necessary crip/Mad/neurodivergent student solidarity has been for me in navigating academia, especially during COVID-19, as this solidarity created rare space for me—and, importantly, many of my colleagues, comrades, and friends—where we can feel heard, seen, valued, and respected. I would even go so far as saying that these spaces exist because of our collective refusal to sustain the conditions upheld by academia. Student solidarity, for me, has been the most powerful when collective experiences of oppression are given room and space to be shared, listened to, and held together. This is often the time I experience a sense of connection in academia the most. After all, if so many students are experiencing systemic oppression in academia because of its racial capitalist values to extract, produce, compete, individualize, and neglect our connection to ourselves and each other, then we are not moving through

academic environments where learning, connection, and curiosity are even psychosomatically possible. How can we be present, curious, and engaged in learning when we are functioning in survival mode because of ongoing systemic violences? Our bodies respond to threats by going into states of fight, flight, freeze, and fawn—or they shut down entirely. Curiosity and learning are not possible in any of these states. Yet, as graduate students, we are expected to model standardized forms of professionalism and success; if we do not perform well in our learning environments, then we are responsibilized for our own failure.

Like all neoliberal institutions, Canadian universities are grounded in extractive violence, professionalization, and individualization.<sup>1</sup> Wendy Brown describes the neoliberal university as aligning with the purpose of “building human capital” where “the market value of knowledge—its income-enhancing prospects for individuals and industry alike—is now understood as both its driving purpose and leading line of defense.”<sup>2</sup> Brown, for example, links neoliberal entrepreneurialism, debt-financed investment, and risk management assessments to current metrics for graduate students’ academic success. She writes,

Graduate students are professionalized through protocols and admonitions orienting them toward developing their own toeholds in their fields. This professionalization aims at making young scholars not into teachers and thinkers, but into human capitals who learn to attract investors by networking long before they ‘go on the market,’ who ‘workshop’ their papers, ‘shop’ their book manuscripts, game their Google Scholar counts and ‘impact factors,’ and above all, follow the money and the rankings. ‘Good investment’ is the way departments speak of new hires, and ‘entrepreneurial’ has become a favored term for describing exceptionally promising young researchers; it is deployed to capture both a researcher’s capacity to parlay existing accomplishments into new ones and the more quotidian business of grant getting.<sup>3</sup>

If graduate students do not meet these arbitrary standards, in other words, then they do not receive institutional investment by way of future funding, opportunities, and support. To not mention the presence of neoliberalism within Canadian university institutions is to depoliticize the way that these public institutions are currently structured by, and enact, the current economic order’s financialization of higher education. Canadian universities are, and always have been, violently extractive institutions—oppressing and harming body/minds marginalized due to systemic experiences of anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, racial capitalism, cisheterosexism, ableism, saneism, and classism. This raises the question: What does it mean to fail in these institutions? This question opens up the radical possibilities of collective refusal, possibilities that make us rethink what it means to succeed in them.



When we acknowledge and listen to the many different experiences of oppression within the current neoliberal university structure, we can also acknowledge that the institution is a failure—rather than bouncing back from its failures—we acknowledge that it is an inherently violent institution. As a starting point, I think that shared pessimism creates room for collaboration amongst those who are considered to be higher education's "bad investments," and those who, I argue, experience the brunt of its failures. These collaborative spaces are indeed possible; they presently exist in our shared struggles and our support for one another. We may need to move sideways, rather than forward, through these messy, and often violent spaces.<sup>4</sup> This, however, makes solidarity and radical care all the more necessary. Our strength is in our collective refusal, not our individual potential to become "good investments" and "human capitals."

**RJ: Building off of this idea of moving through messy and often violent spaces, in crip discussions of disability justice, there is often much talk of "imagined futures" and the importance of thinking through the otherwise, that is, the world that is not yet here.<sup>5</sup> Thinking of this in the context of the crip student experience in academic institutions, do you have visions for what a truly crip and/or accessible academic institution could look like? Is this possible, or even desirable? Has the pandemic shifted or influenced your thinking on this?**

**KK:** I truly think that a progressive academia is a new one. Like, abolish this whole system and start over kind of new. Current iterations of academia are so white-knuckle, focused on our productivity and fitting our lives into academia instead of the other way around, and I feel like we need to rebuild from a much more human framework to even consider any of these futures we speak of.

**SC:** To my mind, an accessible academia is one where disabled students are heard and our needs are centered, there is attention to intersectionality (and how it compounds vulnerabilities of variously marginalized disabled students who inhabit multiple stigmatized identities), where accessibility does not depend on disclosure<sup>6</sup> (making even non-disabled or currently abled-bodyminded people better off because our access needs seldom remain static), there is no dearth of accountability, where conditions are created for those disabled students to thrive who have not "overcome" their disabilities and are simultaneously fighting battles on multiple fronts owing to socioeconomic disablement, sanism and ableism, racism, xenophobia, classism, casteism, queer and transphobia, and the scourge of colonialism induced structural violence and dispossession. I want the academy to be invested in meeting the needs of disabled students in the present. Promise of a just future that we might not live to see is insufficient.

Furthermore, I want to see not just disabled students who have cultural capital and class privilege thrive in the academy, but also those who are first generation learners/college

students, who are working class, racialized, trans, Black, Indigenous, and have been repeatedly told that their disabilities would not allow them to realize their full potential. I want them to have a place in the academy even if the academy's perception of their potential remains unrealized. I want success to be redefined in academia because normative standards of achievement gravely hurt disabled people. I want the academy to create a more level playing field by paying critical attention to equity and justice that historically excluded disabled people deserve and have long been demanding. The pandemic has shown how disabled people are rendered disposable in the everyday. Disability justice means valuing disabled people's lives and aspirations over productivity, normativity, and profit. I dream of a future when all disabled people will be truly seen, heard, and understood and not just those who have been supercripped and valorized for being abled-proximate.

**RJ:** This is interesting to me too, because it leads me to think about how this idea of mis/fitting academia into our lives rather than the other way around could dramatically shift methodology.<sup>7</sup> What kind of insights could we gain through study that occurs within communities, study that is led by those communities, rather than siloed off outside of them and simply using them as "subjects"? How can we have non-exploitative research that centers crip experiences and knowledge if crip students aren't able to thrive or even survive in the current system? If being an "academic" requires conformity to punishing standards of productivity that exclude disabled people almost universally, isn't our knowledge subjugated as a result? Many of us will be familiar with Mia Mingus's work on access intimacy, and it is such an important part of how solidarity among crip/Mad/neurodivergent students has functioned for me. Mingus writes, "the power of access intimacy is that it reorients our approach from one where disabled people are expected to squeeze into able bodied people's world, and instead calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our world."<sup>8</sup> While Mingus highlights that access intimacy can be hard to concisely define,<sup>9</sup> it occurs when we encounter situations where our access needs are deeply understood, welcomed, and met by others without being framed as a burden or obligatory task. Access intimacy can be experienced with anyone, but often emerges as a form of crip solidarity experienced between sick, Mad, disabled, and/or neurodivergent people whose lived experience has given them a complex understanding of access.<sup>10</sup> Critically, when it occurs between crip folks, this solidarity/intimacy emerges from a deep understanding of how ableism has shaped our lives and experiences and a desire to push back against that collectively. So when I think about access intimacy in my own life, and in particular in my academic life, I think about those moments of deep understanding and connection with other crip and neurodivergent grad students I have had the great joy to come to know and collaborate with. To borrow from Muñoz, utopia is quotidian, and the everyday moments of solidarity and gentleness and accountability that we offer to each other matter.<sup>11</sup> Recently I attended an online info session for a large, prestigious

scholarship that shall go unnamed. For reasons that are unclear, the hosts of the info session did not have captions enabled and insisted that there was no way to activate them after the session had started. Faced with this inaccessibility, several students in the session came together spontaneously to fashion some "DIY" captions and a transcript. One small group collaborated on live transcribing everything the hosts were saying into text in the chat. Two others created a shared Google Doc and shared the link with everyone so they could follow along on the doc in real time. One of them took screenshots of each slide that was shared and added image descriptions and wrote out the text from the slides in the document so it was legible by screen readers. Another copied and pasted the DIY captions that were being typed into the chat by others onto the Google Doc under each slide so that all of the verbal information was translated onto the written document. By the end of the session, we had a document that at least attempted to fill the gaps in accessibility that ableism created. I have had so many moments like this where an initial experience of infuriating ableism is countered by crip creativity and problem-solving. Should we have to do this? No. Is the solidarity and commitment to collective access nonetheless meaningful? Yes.

**KG:** I believe that a truly accessible environment in academia is both possible and desirable, and there are tangible steps we can take now. For example, to make academia accessible, disabled people need to be directing their own access needs and should feel safe being in staff and faculty positions. Additionally, disabled/Mad and other marginalized people from diverse contexts need to be invested in *before* they enter academia. There should be more mentorship programs that mentor disabled students both before they enter academia and while they are in academia led by fellow disabled students, faculty, and staff. That is, disabled people should be invested in so that they can achieve their dreams/goals. As Fritsch and Kafer outline, disabled people are often perceived to have inadequate futures by those who are non-disabled.<sup>12</sup> Investing in disabled people would help reshape that narrative. Additionally, everything on campuses should be accessible. For example, the use of braille and tactility in all aspects of design. Websites should be screen reader accessible, including all websites pertaining to, or relevant to academia and scholarships. Course material should be provided in multiple accessible formats, including screen-reader accessible formats. Finally, I want us all to be able to be ourselves, and to be safe, supported, and accepted for the way we are.

**RR:** In "A Manifesto," Yasmin Nair stresses the importance of pessimism and the inevitability of failure in thinking about the future:

Manifestos aren't about hope—a word that has been denuded, stripped, corrupted of its meaning by the last ruler of this country<sup>13</sup>—but about pessimism. Like the utopias they bring forth, manifestos are birthed in the possibility of failure. They succeed not in the audacity of hope but in the audacity of despair. What is the present and the future we need to keep imagining? What is a utopia? What is the nature of our utopias? Do we still dare to have any?<sup>14</sup>

Nair's passage raises an important question in the context of the neoliberal university: how do we make room for failure in a university that continually reminds us of the perceived need to bounce back from it? Resiliency discourses are increasingly prevalent in universities across Canada. These discourses tell us that we can bounce back from our problems. Resilience is entwined with the imperative of academic production, wherein scholars are expected to keep up with unrealistic timelines and churn out articles, conference presentations, and books at an ever-increasing rate. The problem with neoliberal resiliency narratives, however, is that they obscure the structural causes of the stressors experienced by those most marginalized within, and outside of, university walls—colonialism, anti-Blackness, whiteness, racial capitalism, ableism, saneism, cisheterosexism, and classism.<sup>15</sup> I think it is important that we are continually reflecting on how pessimism is a form of resisting and refusing neoliberal logics. Contrary to resilience, "happiness," and "wellness" discourses, acts of collective refusal create the conditions necessary for radical enclaves of solidarity and collaboration amongst those most marginalized by the university. Our relationship to one another is personal, collective, and political. How can we be happy while we are experiencing systemic injustices? We need solidarity and connection to heal and resist continuing harmful legacies of oppression.

Pessimism has the potential to bring about collaboration and complicated forms of solidarity, though not immune to the complexities inherent to working across differences; it fundamentally casts doubt upon the neoliberal university, which opens up space for critical discussions amongst those who doubt it. Political listening is critical to this process. Anna Tsing argues that we should practice "arts of noticing"—that is, moments of looking around as opposed to the capitalist practice of looking forward. Tsing links "latent commons" with Beverley Brown's argument for political listening.<sup>16</sup> Like Tsing's arts of noticing, Brown defines political listening as the detection of "the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas."<sup>17</sup> These practices of noticing evoke the need to recognize sites of solidarity through the hints of not yet fully elaborated "common agendas."<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, Tsing puts forth "latent commons" as an alternative to capitalist progress narratives, such as what she critiques as the "hope that progress will lead us to a redemptive and utopian commons."<sup>19</sup> The premise behind Tsing's conceptualization of latent commons is the recognition that worlds are messy, complex, and uncontainable, whereas institutions try to contain, and separate out the complexities of the world, which Tsing argues must be shared in common. When students are expected to bounce back in order to adapt to and withstand the

impacts of systemic violences experienced within higher education spaces, we forego the necessity to care for students without the capacity and/or resources to do so. The radicals among us, however, will recognize this as a moment to refuse capitalist progress narratives that leave so many behind and extend—rather than remove and eradicate—care, connection, and solidarity.

**RJ: Thank you all so much for sharing these generative thoughts and ideas. I know there's so much more we could say, but time and word limits demand that we wrap up here. Having the opportunity to collaborate with my fellow crip/disabled/Mad/neurodivergent colleagues and fellow students always renews my sense of hope for future possibilities. In solidarity.**

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. Neoliberal/neoliberalism is a term that can mean many different things depending on field, context, or geographic location. For the purposes of this discussion, neoliberalism refers to the practice of applying economic analyses to all aspects of life; Carolyn Hardin, "Finding the 'Neo' in Neoliberalism," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 207, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.748815> <<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.748815>>. This understanding of neoliberalism is often associated with Foucault, who states that in a US context, neoliberalism refers to the practice of using "market economy and the typical analyses of the market economy to decipher non-market relationships"; Michel Foucault, Graham Burchell, and Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 240. In the context of the university, this often refers to practices that include (among others) treating students as consumers and education as a product, institutional priorities that focus on profit and productivity, and tying measurements of "student success" to future employability. ↩
2. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 187. ↩
3. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 195. ↩
4. Joshua St. Pierre and Danielle Peers, "Telling Ourselves Sideways, Crooked and Crip: An Introduction," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 5, no. 3 (2016): 2. ↩
5. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1. ↩
6. Disclosure is dangerous for disabled people when life-affirming supports are lacking or absent, when disclosing a disability leads to exclusion and stigmatization, rendering the disabled person vulnerable anew. When accessibility and disability justice are centered, and our access needs and need for differential supports are met, we will not have to depend on disclosure to survive and live. Disclosure also demands disabled people make their life/medical histories, quotidian lived realities, and their pain available for consumption. The demand for disclosure also can be rooted in the belief that disabled people are not entitled to their privacy. Disabled people's

narratives can be taken up to disadvantage them and their communities when such disclosure becomes compulsory and a necessity rather than a choice. ↵

7. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 593. Garland-Thomson's concept of "misfitting" is valuable here. As Garland-Thomson explains, a misfit is someone who is out of place or out of sync with their environment or circumstances (593). The built environments we interact with and the systems and norms that shape our daily lives are typically created with non-disabled people in mind, thus rendering disabled people misfits (594). While "misfit" is often understood with negative connotations, Garland-Thomson explains that misfitting can highlight social injustice and be a productive way of disrupting normative understandings of the world that create barriers for disabled people and other "misfits." This experience of misfitting can generate solidarity among those with shared experiences of exclusion, leading to a more liberatory politics (597). She states, "When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow" (597). This highlights the importance of the relationship between people and their environment (and the unfixed/changeable nature of that relationship) to our understanding of justice and inclusion. ↵
  8. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice," *Leaving Evidence*, April 12, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> > . ↵
  9. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence*, May 5, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> > . ↵
  10. Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." ↵
  11. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22. ↵
  12. Kelly Fritsch, "Crippling Neoliberal Futurity: Marking the Elsewhere and Elsewhen of Desiring Otherwise," *Feral Feminisms* 5 (2016): 11–26; Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). ↵
  13. In this quote, the country Nair is referring to is the United States, and the last ruler is President Barack Obama. ↵
  14. Yasmin Nair, "A Manifesto," *Evergreen Review*, <http://evergreenreview.com/read/a-manifesto/> < <http://evergreenreview.com/read/a-manifesto/> > , para. 18. ↵
  15. Phillips, Janet. "From Containment to Resilience: A Genealogy of the Governance of Mental Abnormality in Canada" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2017), 192. ↵
  16. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) 254–55. ↵
  17. Tsing, *Mushroom*, 254. ↵
  18. Tsing, *Mushroom*, 255. ↵
  19. Tsing, *Mushroom*, 255. ↵
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# Author Information

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Rachel Jobson is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Carleton University on the unceded territories of the Algonquin Nation. She is a white, settler, queer, physically disabled and neurodivergent student researching the socio-legal construction of the nuclear family as the only sanctioned site of care outside of paid care work and institutionalization. She is an active member of the Disability Justice and Crip Cultural Collaboratory, a research lab that brings together disabled scholars, artists, designers, activists, and community members doing work on crip and disability art and culture, politics, technoscience and design, accessibility, and justice.

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## Kristen Kowlessar

Kristen Kowlessar is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Carleton University, located on the unceded territories of the Algonquin Nation. She is a Black,

lesbian, mentally and chronically ill person researching the ways in which Thunder Bay, Ontario operates as a site for cultural meaning-making, expression, and identity formation. Their work also addresses how Thunder Bay's racial order might be reproduced or disrupted in spaces meant to celebrate multiculturalism and what the implications are for the quality of life that Black, Indigenous, and other visibly racialized people are able to have in the city. Additionally, Kristen's work engages with critical race conversations and whiteness, put broadly. Their work is community-based and is grounded in a decolonial antiracist feminist praxis. Additionally, she is a co-founder of the CEDAR Care Collective.

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## River Rossi

River Rossi is a white, settler, trans, queer, Mad, and neurodivergent PhD student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University. They hold an MA in Sociology from Carleton University, and a BA (hons.) in Women's and Gender Studies from the University of Alberta. Their past work has examined intersections of disability and AIDS activism in Canada, trauma and memory studies, and queer phenomenology. Their doctoral research expands on their work with the [Anti-69 Network](#) by contextually grounding the ways that settler colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism intertwine to produce the Canadian nation-state formation's ongoing regulation of gender, sexuality, and disability. More broadly, their research resides in the fields of critical disability studies, Mad studies, critical trans studies, sexuality studies, settler colonial studies, anti-capitalist social movements, and social philosophy.

[View all of River Rossi's articles.](#)

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## Our Thoughts: Reflections on OCD, the Pandemic, and Society

by Dana Fennell and Mick Jones | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** In this socially engaged and collaborative project, the topic of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is explored artistically. A poem and sculpture depict and contemplate the lived experience of OCD and how it relates to contemporary times. The project grew out of a friendship between Mick, the alias for someone who has OCD, and Dana Fennell, a researcher who studies OCD.

**KEYWORDS** art, contagion, poetry, OCD, sociology, coping



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/past-present-and-future-color-Dana-F.jpg>

Dana Fennell

*Past, present, and future*, 2022

Glazed ceramic with acrylic paint

18 x 8"

# Mick's Poem

I've been down this road before,  
Dodging threats no one can see.  
"Don't touch your face!"—who would do?  
"Wash your hands!"—I've done too much.  
To cross the street when passing  
Just feels natural; to see  
My neighbors doing so does not.  
Why's everybody angry? This is life!  
1919 was only days ago,  
And cholera and smallpox were much worse.  
Lurid scenes on news broadcasts,  
Numbers tossed about.  
Shuttered schools and businesses—  
There'll be a price, no doubt.  
Although I must admit, I wouldn't stay  
Before thirty-some students now,  
Confined within a bungalow all day.  
I know some folks who won't admit it's real  
And others who feel sure they'll die of this.  
I tell them—just be careful,  
Heed me well: this isn't my first rodeo.

## Context

*Our Thoughts* is a collaboration between Mick Jones, the alias of someone who has obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and Dana Fennell, a sociologist. It includes a poem and sculpture.

Mick has had OCD since age 5 and it colors his worldview. His obsessions and compulsions have taken different forms and include thoughts and rituals related to contamination. When he was young, one of his fears was that an insect was cavorting in his nose and he would repeatedly wash his nose at the drinking fountain at school. One of Mick's responses has been to use water on his contamination fears. He carries a spray bottle of water in his car, and quips that for him spray bottles are like the wipes the character Monk carried and regularly employed to clean, in the television show by the same name.

The fears of people with OCD vary by historical period,<sup>1</sup> and in the past people had obsessional fears about issues of their time such as the plague.<sup>2</sup> Research has indicated living during the COVID-19 pandemic has affected those with OCD and has been associated with a worsening of some people's symptoms.<sup>3</sup> However, Mick's anxiety during the pandemic has not been extraordinary, merely noticeable. He recognizes that he has two advantages in this regard: OCD and degrees in biological sciences. As others wrangled with how to protect themselves from COVID-19, it was easy for him to eschew touching his face, to remember to wash whatever hand touched public surfaces, and to avoid people on the street. He understands how viruses work and the dynamics of their spread and die-off.

As a researcher, Dana has studied people's lived experiences with OCD and representations of the disorder in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Mick and Dana have been discussing public perceptions of OCD for more than fifteen years. Therefore, they decided to collaborate on this interdisciplinary representation of OCD during the pandemic.

The poem and sculpture highlight the impact of society on our doubts and fears, especially their cyclical features. The poem was written by Mick and draws connections between the past and present, providing his thoughts on contamination and his advice for others during the pandemic. As the pandemic has worn on, Mick has received remarks from family. One commented, "Now we're all like you." Another said, "I understand that now you feel vindicated." Rather than feel vindicated, it is more that he is not terribly surprised. The sculpture is constructed by Dana and designed collaboratively, founded on their conversations. One side of the spray bottle points to Mick's contamination fears of the past. The other side points off into the distance, representing our fears about the future.

## Notes

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  2. S. Rachman and Ray J. Hodgson, *Obsessions and Compulsions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 22–25. ↩
  3. Vahid Khosravani, Frederick Aardema, Seyed Mehdi Samimi Ardestani, and Farangis Sharifi Bastan, "The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Specific Symptom Dimensions and Severity in OCD: A Comparison before and during COVID-19 in the Context of Stress Responses," *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 29 (2021); J. B. Nissen, D. R. M. A. Højgaard, and P. H. Thomsen, "The Immediate Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Adolescents with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder," *BMC Psychiatry* 20 (2020). ↩
  4. See [www.danafennell.com](http://www.danafennell.com) < <http://www.danafennell.com> > and Dana Fennell, *The World of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: The Experiences of Living with OCD* (New York: NYU Press, 2022). ↩
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# Author Information



## Dana Fennell

Dana Fennell is a professor of sociology at the University of Southern Mississippi. She studies issues of well-being and recently published *The World of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: The Experiences of Living with OCD* with NYU Press. She hopes her interdisciplinary work with Mick Jones will contribute to building more paths between scholars, artists, and the community. Dana's other work has included research on farmers' growing practices, silence in religious ritual, viewers' interpretation of anime, consumers' use of complementary health practices, and people's experiences engaging in pole dance and aerial arts.

[View all of Dana Fennell's articles.](#)

## Mick Jones

Growing up during the Cold War, Mick Jones found much to worry about: nuclear annihilation, Soviet espionage, domestic violence, overpopulation, pandemics, resource depletion, pollution of air and water—but he refused to limit his concerns to such popular problems. Inspired by Roger Bradfield's classic tale *The Flying Hockey Stick*, Mick began his obsessive-compulsive career at age five by making sure to exit via the same door he entered anywhere, so that the imaginary line trailing him would not become tangled. Graduating from this behavior, Mick developed a habit of prefacing all his statements with "I think," in order to avoid inadvertently giving voice to an untruth. In high school, Mick augmented this conduct with a constant concern over contamination—both to avoid contaminating those around him and to keep from being contaminated by them. He has worried that he might accidentally hit someone while driving, that his words might have offended someone (generally when they haven't; he seems not to notice when, in fact, they have), and that the new plastic shower curtain is poisoning him with its fumes. He eventually found his calling as a tutor of mathematics, where precision and checking one's work are virtues.

[View all of Mick Jones's articles.](#)

## Article details

Dana Fennell and Mick Jones, "Our Thoughts: Reflections on OCD, the Pandemic, and Society," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

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## Chronic Illness Wisdom is Both/And

by Carmen Cutler | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** This poem reflects on dual tensions that sick & disabled communities have to navigate during ongoing pandemic conditions. In particular, it addresses the chronic illness knowledges that people with post-viral illnesses already possess (the reality of chronic conditions after acute infections, the necessity of solidarity across bed space) in the face of medical and political institutions that refuse to know.

**KEYWORDS** disability, knowledge, pandemic, chronic illness, bed space, post-viral

To live with dysautonomia or ME or long  
covid or a myriad of chronic illnesses is to  
already know, to repeatedly sound  
the alarm, that viruses are not  
an either/or matter of  
recovery or death

and yet have health systems, policies, and  
official numbers continuously fail to reflect  
what we know, what we've lived in the  
both/and land of post-viral illness.

We know what it's like to make it through  
an infection

and still remain sick, year after year.

In any viral outbreak, we know to expect  
5%, 10%, 20% of those infected



to "recover"

and yet never recover.

We know that 5%, 10%, 20% of a population  
is both small

and enormous.

Small enough to make you think  
it will never happen to you

and enormous enough to engulf  
the millions missing.

This is known. For decades, we've written it,  
shouted it, marched for it,  
cared for each other through it

and yet it is unknown, a parade of shocked  
journalists and clinicians and researchers and  
public health officials who refuse to know.

We're learning, together, to deeply love  
our sick bodyminds

and also would not wish this fatigue  
on anyone.

We know how vital it is to slow down, to  
rest, our bodyminds show the signs

and we know how capitalism shreds the  
possibilities for it.

We know what it feels like to be  
simultaneously more isolated

and more connected with our disability  
community.

We know this is nothing new, we've been  
connecting across time and space from  
our couches and beds for years

and yet this time requires nimble ways to  
navigate new waves of old grief.

In it all we hold deep grief for loss of life

and deep solidarity with the hundreds-  
thousands-millions who are now starting  
their chronically ill lives.

## Artist's Statement

Living through an ongoing pandemic era highlights the knowledges that disabled people already have, which are not acknowledged in public health responses, nor in public discourse. From the first weeks of this pandemic, chronically ill communities already knew that it would be a mass disabling event, adding to the already existing necropolitical processes of debility<sup>1</sup>—from the impacts of climate disaster to chemical injury from environmental toxicities within geographies of racial capitalism. Chronically ill community knowledges are a vital resource for the newly disabled. Disabled people with post-viral illness(es) already know the deep value of rest; the indispensability of collective grieving processes and of connecting with each other across bed space(s) for survival and crip joy.<sup>2</sup>

In collecting my thoughts for this piece, I turned to a both/and approach as a way of thinking that has the capacity to hold tensions without breaking.<sup>3</sup> The context of the COVID pandemic illustrates a both/and that we are required to dwell in—resisting the violence of the Medical Industrial Complex while also fighting for increased access to medical resources. "Chronic Illness Wisdom is Both/And" in essence argues that chronic illness communities are particularly well-practiced in this approach, by necessity.

So often, chronically ill people as a whole are relegated outside a collectively presumed “we”—particularly in public discourse around severe illness and death risk from COVID, the chronically ill are the “them” to the presumed “us” of ableist society: Our “we” is sequestered from the general body politic, and made invisible by dominant narratives that refuse to consider disability as a fact of life. Both as a way to imagine a different kind of public and to resist individualized narratives about chronic illness, I intentionally use the word “we” in this piece instead of “I.” I use “we” to recognize a public that knows chronic illness as multiple, overlapping, nuanced experiences within an array of social locations, recognizing that ableism is distributed unevenly across race, geography, class, and myriad combinations of systems of oppression. In the face of negligence, refusal of care, and political erasure, I invoke a public comprised of sick and disabled communities, a body politic whose knowledge is crucial for collective change and our own crip futures.

## Visual Description

The poem is divided into two columns. Each sentence begins in the left column as right justified text. As soon as the word “and” occurs, the sentence shifts to the right column as left justified text. This is to create a push and pull, like a balance scale with the word “and” as a fulcrum. The meanings in each sentence teeter totter to capture the tensions between community knowledge and conflicting ableist norms.

## Notes

1. Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). ↩
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3. Mia Mingus, Talila Lewis, Liat Ben-Moshe, and Connie Wun, “Disability Justice, COVID, and Abolition (an ASA 2020 Freedom Course),” American Studies Association Official, November 15, 2020, YouTube, 1:07:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4OKA2nKGC8>. ↩

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## Author Information

### Carmen Cutler

Carmen Cutler is a sick and disabled doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work focuses on the lived experiences of sick and

disabled communities, and their knowledges both personal and political, embedded in long histories of community resistance against the violence and neglect of medical institutions.

[View all of Carmen Cutler's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## August 2020

by Jennifer Scuro | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** Unemployed at the time, not visibly disabled, but having become quite unwell in the middle of a pandemic, this poem illustrates my anxious and exhausting insomnia against the caretaking labor for my youngest child. I worked to minimize the projections of stress and anxiety onto her, laboring for stillness and comfort. As Luce Irigaray states in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), "Music comes before meaning. A sort of preliminary to meaning, coming after warmth, moisture, softness, kinesthesia" (168).

**KEYWORDS** disability, crip, pandemic, poetry, parenting

I'm dreamless these days,  
most days.  
I wake wearing my cement shoes.  
Mornings add slip to the cement.

It is as I twilight  
that the nightmares visit.

The roll-out of the a.m.  
Insomniac stares.  
I catch myself wandering in my cement shoes.

Woke again.  
Light cracks through blackout shades.  
The baby sleeps next to me.  
Delicious.  
Too old for mommy's bed,  
too young to know this much anxiety.

Woke again.  
Still safe.  
Still scared of the next part.

The sleeping baby is a mirror of me  
yet to be.  
Delicious, soft-cheeked.  
A starfish  
without weights  
pulling her own weight  
  
through her turn in the universe.  
  
Mornings do not renew.  
  
It is the plan yet again  
in the safety of another dreamless night  
to stay alive.  
  
I hear breathing but no birdsong.  
She is the music of morning  
with her snorts and her sniffles.  
Too old to be in mommy's bed,  
too young for all this anxiety.

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## Author Information



### Jennifer Scuro

Jennifer Scuro is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Molloy University in New York. She is the author of *The Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing Project: A Phenomenology of Miscarriage* (Rowman & Littlefield International, Feb 2017) and *Addressing Ableism: Philosophical Questions via Disability Studies* (Lexington Books, Oct 2017). She is on the Governing Board of the Cultural Studies Association and co-chair of the Critical Feminist and Queer Studies Working Group.

[View all of Jennifer Scuro's articles.](#)

Jennifer Scuro, "August 2020," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

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## Overwhelmed

by Sam Fein | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** The isolation, stress, and uncertainty fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our collective mental health. For people with preexisting psychiatric disabilities, these repercussions are further magnified. This is particularly true for individuals who have experienced involuntary confinement in "corrective" facilities. For survivors of institutional abuse, the gross restriction of movement generated by the quarantine and lockdowns replicates the systems of total control to which they have previously been subjected. Facing an uncertain future and lacking access to community support systems, many survivors have been forced to improvise mechanisms to relieve traumatic symptoms on their own. While these self-soothing mechanisms can provide relief during moments of acute distress, they may be ultimately destructive and exacerbate long-term symptomatology. This artwork is an expression of overwhelm and the conundrum faced when survival strategies that meet immediate needs threaten long-term well-being.

**KEYWORDS** COVID-19, mental health, institutional abuse, psychiatric disability

"This mind isn't mine, who am I to judge? / Oh, I should be fine, but it's all too much"

—Royal and the Serpent





< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/5\\_Overwhelmed-Sam-Fein.jpg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/5_Overwhelmed-Sam-Fein.jpg) >

Sam Fein  
*Overwhelmed*, 2021  
Gouache, ink, and pencil on paper  
15.5 x 19.5 in

# Description

Note: Elements of this artwork are intended to be ambiguous and subject to interpretation by the viewer. I have used asterisks (\*) to indicate these points of ambiguity and slashes to indicate when there can be multiple interpretations of an object in the composition.

An androgynous figure\* is in a dark room, backlit by the neon yellow light of a nearby TV screen. The figure is bathed in shades of blue and wears large eyeglasses and a torn t-shirt. There is a lit joint/rolled cigarette\* hanging out of their open mouth. The figure appears bewildered as a group of translucent ghosts flies towards them. In front of the figure is a disarray of items: a half-eaten donut and pizza slice, a turned-over container of melted ice cream, a microphone/back massager/sex toy\*, a liquor bottle, and a margarita glass with a lime on the rim. In the right-hand corner is an ashtray littered with stubbed-out cigarettes, joints, and a roach clip.

Behind the figure there is an old box-style TV with a staticky screen. The TV screen displays four cartoon joints interacting with one another. It is not exactly clear what the joints are doing, although it appears one joint is holding and strangling another\*. A fifth cartoon joint appears tied up on the floor in front of the others\*.

The majority of the scene is engulfed in layers of black ink and indigo gouache. A neon yellow glow emanates from the TV, casting highlights on the figure and items in the foreground. Bold pencil strokes are used to create shadows, patterns, and other details. The repeated layering of paint washes and pencil strokes produces an overall gritty texture on the composition.

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## Author Information



### Sam Fein

Sam Fein is an independent artist, curator, educator, and community organizer working to build collective power with survivors of institutional abuse.

[View all of Sam Fein's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Security Blanket: Neuroqueer Knitting in Pandemic Times

by Rebecca-Eli M. Long | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** This article presents neuroqueer knitting as a cripistemological practice in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the author realized that knitting was part of how they moved through trauma. Tracing the process of making a blanket during part of the pandemic, a time in which they were also relocating, the author argues that knitting offers a knowledge-making practice aligned with their autistic ways of being in the world. Treating this blanket as theoretical material, the author uses it to challenge ableist ideas of autistic people as lacking the capacity to narrate their experiences. Instead, this blanket is used to reflect alternative modes of knowing that document the author's continued existence and survival in moments of trauma and upheaval.

**KEYWORDS** art, disability, cripistemology, autism, neurodivergence, research-creation, craft

When the pandemic combines with personal upheaval, what do we turn to? While safety feels distant and difficult for many disabled people, what small ways do we work to create security in our daily lives? Knitting has been my survival practice for pandemic times. I was knitting for about eighteen months prior to the pandemic, but as my life changed with the pandemic's onset, I found myself knitting even more incessantly, sometimes even without purpose, knitting something that I knew would later be unraveled. I came to realize that knitting was how I moved through trauma in a way that was in keeping with neurodivergent sensation and meaning-making. Through knitting, I crafted not only sweaters and such, but my own identity as an autistic artist and researcher.

To be autistic is to be figured as not quite there or absent. Autistic rhetorician Remi Yergeau describes this as being thought of as an "absent presence, an embodied state impervious to knowing."<sup>1</sup> This positioning denies autistic peoples' epistemic capacity to accurately narrate our experiences. Autistic people are then seen as not-quite-human and with our communication "lacking in meaning, purpose, or social value."<sup>2</sup>

The stakes of this are significant. Autistic people become visible not as knowing communicators, but as the targets of the cultural “war on autism,” which present the only possible good future as being through the early detection, intervention, and eventual cure of autism—a future in which autism, and therefore, autistic people, no longer exist.<sup>3</sup> Autistic people therefore face not only rhetorical absence but also the threat of existential erasure.

To counter this, I have developed a scholarly-activist commitment to materializing autistic presence in refutation of those who would view autistic and other disabled people as lacking. I believe that not only do we need to tell new stories of autism, but that changing our cultural narratives of autism requires telling these stories in new ways. Knitting is an extension of this commitment, a way of turning autistic experiences into knitted form. One of these projects is this piece, which I title “Security Blanket.”





<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-1-Rebecca-Eli-Long.jpg>

Figure 1. Large knitted rainbow blanket on bed. Photograph by author, August 1, 2021.

This blanket is theoretical material. In asserting this blanket as theory, I am arguing that neurodiversity should not only refer to many types of “embodiminds,” but also a diversity of knowledge-making practices, including cripistemologies.<sup>4</sup> I turn to cripistemologies to challenge not only *what* we know about disability but *how* we know and represent such knowledge, particularly in moments of crisis that might destabilize our knowledge. With thousands of stitches, this blanket evidences the many minor gestures that make up the daily micro-practices we use to make ourselves feel a little safer.<sup>5</sup> In the many rows of

marled yarn, I find a testament to my continued survivance through ongoing and overlapping crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

My pandemic life, like many people who were fortunate enough to have access to remote work, was marked by staying at home. In this context, I found I was no longer constrained by the portability of the knitting projects that previously accompanied me to campus. I could also keep a knitting pattern open on my screen while I was in Zoom meetings, supporting more complex projects.<sup>6</sup> As I participated in the first year of my doctoral program from out-of-state, knitting and my academic growth intertwined until they became inseparable, happening in overlapping crip spacetime.<sup>7</sup>

In the summer of 2021, my relation to knitting and spacetime shifted again when I began the process of relocating to my university. The move came during one of the lapses in the intensity of the pandemic, but other stressors kept me on edge. As a queer and disabled person, the challenges related to moving were daunting, exacerbating the everyday inequities and pandemic worries, and I found myself wondering how I would make it through.

One day, my body tensed with anxiety, I decided to begin the pre-moving task of untangling my yarn. I had several drawers of yarn that had begun to unwind itself out of its skeins, and a layer of rogue yarn blanketed my closet floor. Reluctantly, I faced the jumble, telling myself that it would at least be a good distraction, and if I wanted, I could take my frustrations out on the yarn by ripping it apart. As I sat on the floor surrounded by these tangles, I came to realize how much yarn I had acquired over the pandemic, how much yarn I would have to find space for in my packing, and just how scared I was.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image2-1.jpeg> >

Figure 2. Piece of knitted fabric. Photograph by author, July 20, 2021.

As I was faced with the sheer amount of yarn that I had accumulated, I decided that if untangling yarn counted as packing, knitting it into something so that it didn't re-tangle also counted as packing. What started out as a bit of a joke quickly grew into the edge of a blanket, as I started knitting. Over the next few days, I sorted through my yarn, grouping it by color, holding as many as five strands together at a time as I worked my way through a color gradient. When I ran out of one strand of yarn, I simply tied on a new piece, and kept going. However, beyond the logistics of packing, these literal loose ends came to represent deeper entanglements.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-3-Rebecca-Eli-Long-1.jpeg> >

Figure 3. The same blanket as above, but significantly longer, with a brown stripe added. Photograph by author, July 22, 2021.

I found myself reflecting on the challenges of self-representation, particularly in times of crisis, particularly, when one tends to be denied rhetoricity in the first place. Yergeau proposes that autism queers rhetoric and that autistic people create neuroqueer rhetorics that “articulate alternate spaces and knowledge for inter/relating.”<sup>8</sup> Such rhetorics can contribute to and expand criptistemological projects.

Knitting offers a neuroqueer rhetoric, one that defiantly stims and gestures, fabricating autistic existence. This blanket is marked by neuroqueer excess, as moments of feeling too much combined with my piles of yarn.<sup>9</sup> Excess, redundance, and intensity are frequent elements of a criptistemology of crisis.<sup>10</sup> The material excess of this blanket is odds and

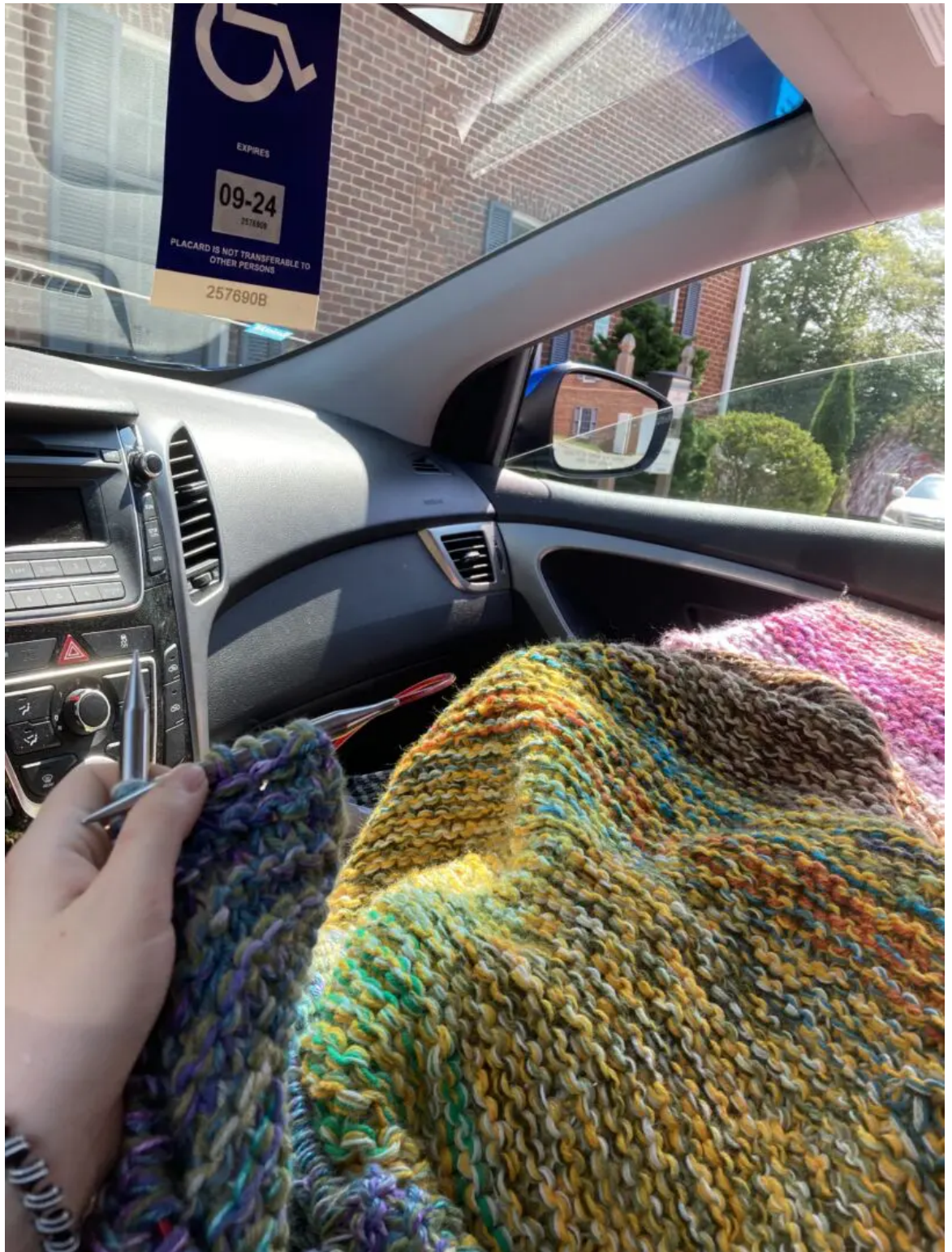
ends of leftover yarn, yarn that didn't quite work out for its originally intended project, and yarn given to me by friends. Not only was the practice of knitting this blanket a marker of my experiences during the moving process, but it became a way for me to acknowledge my connections and past experiences as I prepared to relocate. This excess yarn entangled with my emotions to create a record of me moving through crisis and moving while in crisis.

Neuroqueer knitting, as I have come to understand my practice, is a playful approach to subverting meaning, while insisting that autistic people can, in fact, create meanings of our own. In thinking through this process as not only an exercise in crafting, but as a way to think with(in) crisis, I foreground my neurological queerness. Not only does it mark how my neurodivergence and queerness meant that I experienced crisis in particular, situated ways, but it indexes the epistemological struggle of asserting that autistic communication is valid.

Knitting has a storied history as a form of textile politics—a way of making political commitments material—particularly in relation to gender and queerness.<sup>11</sup> While craft is often dismissed as women's work or considered less significant than fine art, it also has been used as a way to subvert ideas of what counts as meaningful knowledge. Craft is not only a category of objects, but a way of making and doing. As a queer-feminist practice of surviving in an often-hostile world, fiber arts are a vehicle for crafting one's self and community.<sup>12</sup>

Through this history, knitting becomes a way to advance a set of ideals and queerly challenge expectations. As neuroqueer subjects, autistic people are frequently denied narrative agency and competence.<sup>13</sup> Autistic communication is always already queered, and in further queering autistic communication through craft, I draw attention to types of narratives that are frequently overlooked. Knitting offers a material commitment to neurodivergent epistemologies through expanding what might be taken as meaningful knowledge making practices.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-4-Rebecca-Eli-Long.jpg> >

Figure 4. Blanket being knitted while author sits in car. Photograph by author, July 27, 2021.

I did not finish the blanket before I moved. Too large to fit in any bag, the blanket instead occupied the front seat of my car and, later, the second bed in the hotel room midway through the trip, where I lived for a week, doing archival research at a nearby college and



completing the blanket. The blanket, even when finished and neatly folded, still refused to be contained in any of my bags, and I triumphantly rolled it out of the hotel on a luggage cart to complete the final leg of the trip.

As much as knitting has been an activity initiated by trauma, the deeper I dive into the theoretical material it provides, I realize it is also an entry point for thinking about autistic joy and crip creativity. Knitting is a sensory activity; it helps me make sense of my experiences.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-5-Rebecca-Eli-Long.jpg> >

Figure 5. A holographic pink sticker, designed by Jen White Johnson, is stuck in a ball of yarn. Photograph by author, Oct 7, 2021.

I approach joy hesitantly. As a Mad person, intense emotions other than joy frequently mark my life. Yet I find excitement in the framework of autistic joy, a framework I encountered through the artwork of Jen White Johnson, who formulates joy as a mode of resistance, especially in the context of Blackness.<sup>14</sup> Joy is subversive because experiencing joy is counter to expectations of autism, which is, in foundational medical language a “disturbance of affective contact” and more recent diagnostic criteria includes “reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect.”<sup>15</sup> Diagnostic criteria for autism are predicated on

the autistic person experiencing distress, and the mainstream logic of autism intervention tells us we should feel fear or anger about autism, certainly not joy. Autism, and autistic flourishing, is at odds with typical conceptions of what a good life can look like.<sup>16</sup> Given the cultural logic of autism as tragedy, foregrounding autistic joy has political stakes.

Knitting brings me a type of autistic joy that comes from engaging in a deep passion and sensory pleasure. This joy is not irrelevant to trauma and crises; it is part of how I live. Knitting is not only a mode of occupying space that helps process trauma; it is a way of insisting that as disabled people, we are creative and have the knowledge to move through crisis. As I create by knitting, the steady growth of the knitted fabric indicates that I have, in fact, survived.

## Notes

1. M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 54. ↩
2. Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 15. ↩
3. Anne McGuire, *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016). McGuire describes how practices of autism advocacy frame autism as an urgent crisis to be combatted, as well as how these practices position autism as incompatible with any sort of life worth living. ↩
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5. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). ↩
6. Given the ongoing stakes of remote access as a disability accommodation, it's important to note that remote access is not an inherently inferior mode of connecting but can lead to generative modes of engagement. ↩
7. Margaret Price, "Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 257–77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915966> > . See also Margaret Price, *Crip Spacetime: A Re-orientation to Disability Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming). ↩
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## Author Information



### Rebecca-Eli M. Long

Rebecca-Eli M. Long is a disabled scholar, activist, and artist who works to disrupt ableist structural violence across geographic and disciplinary contexts. An avid knitter, Rebecca-Eli is interested in how creative forms of knowledge-making can contribute to social justice. They are a PhD candidate in anthropology and gerontology at Purdue University. Their dissertation research uses knitting to find new ways of authoring autistic experiences that highlight moments of autistic joy, meaning-making, and connection.

[View all of Rebecca-Eli M. Long's articles.](#)

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## assembly required: textures of madness, joy, memory

by Sav Schlauderaff | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

**ABSTRACT** This piece stitches and layers together a mix of photographs, poetry, and reflections to tell a story—my story—of c-PTSD, grief, (chosen) family, and my constant yearning to exist fully as myself.

**KEYWORDS** trauma, PTSD, madness, mixed media art

*Note: This work includes discussions of childhood sexual abuse, incest, domestic violence, rape, and self-harm. None of these traumatic events in my life are discussed in detail in this piece but rather are represented as memories/flashbacks in the art I have created. If these topics are triggering for you as a reader, this may not be a piece that is right for you to engage with at this time.*

## Introduction: assembly required

This art was made in bed. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha explains, “writing from bed is a time-honored disabled way of being an activist and cultural worker.”<sup>1</sup>

Last summer I slowly read through Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s edited collection, *Beyond Survival* (2020), in the midst of experiencing PTSD flashbacks, hallucinations, paranoia, a barrage of memories of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), and an overwhelming feeling of isolation during the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

After months of increasing paranoia, visual and auditory hallucinations, intrusive thoughts of self-harm, and severe anxiety, I reached out to a therapist for the first time since 2013. From there I joined a CSA group therapy and we have just now concluded our group after over a year and a half. We worked through the Big Yellow workbook, a.k.a. *The Courage to Heal*, meeting once every week.<sup>3</sup> I will admit I still often felt a pang of hesitancy in this





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**Figure 1a. Calling back the pieces.** A light tan felt doll the author created. The doll's body and limbs are disconnected and laid out on Sav's kitchen table with thread, pens, an open notebook, buttons, a coffee mug, extra fabric, a red velvet pin cushion, and sewing scissors are surrounding the doll.

group, but it is also the only space where I have been able to simply speak and show my *thoughtfeelings* relating to my childhood sexual abuse without shame or discomfort.<sup>4</sup>

I have found support through transformative justice perspectives, my childhood sexual assault support group, new psychiatric medications (although none of them actually ended up helping me), and the many necessary mad and disability community virtual events. These have helped me grow with my madness, and to build out my *care web* or *pod*.<sup>5</sup> And importantly, these resources/supports have given me space to practice reaching out for help when I need it<sup>6</sup>—especially during a global pandemic that physically and emotionally isolated me.<sup>7</sup>



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**Figure 1b. A practice in creating support.** The limbs and body of the doll are pinned together. A red velvet pin cushion and red thread are beside the doll laid out on Sav's kitchen table.

This art has taken years to formulate, and years to process the trauma and abuse I have experienced—yet it feels like now it has all spilled out of me at once, and this is my way of stitching myself back together. This imagery draws from Anzaldúa's concept of "the Coyolxauhqui Imperative." She describes Coyolxauhqui as "your symbol for both the process of emotional psychical dismemberment, splitting body/mind/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form, a partially unconscious work done in the night by the light of the moon, a labor of re-visioning and re-memembering . . . . With the loss of the familiar and the unknown ahead, you struggle to regain your balance, reintegrate yourself (put Coyolxauhqui together) and repair the damage."<sup>8</sup>

To represent my *thoughtfeelings*, I have utilized short journal entries, poetry, photos, marginalia<sup>9</sup>, mixed-media art, collaging and hand-sewing/handcrafting. Through this





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**Image 1c. My scars are visible, but so is my healing.** Two overlaid photos taken by the author. Sav is hand stitching parts of the light tan felt doll together with red thread. The stitches are apparent in contrast to the light tan stitches around the rest of the doll.

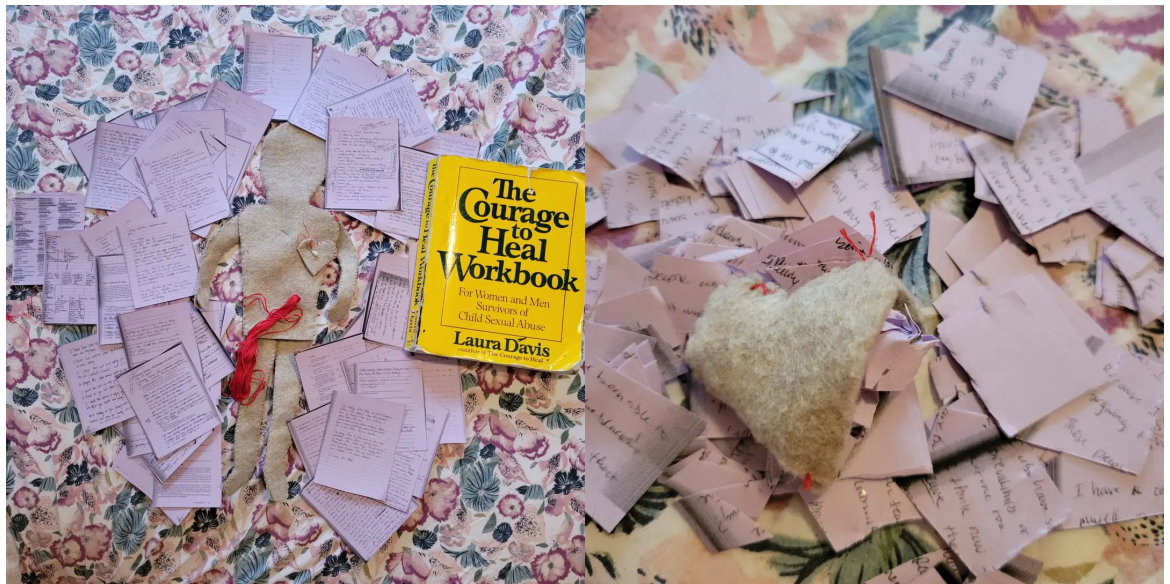
assemblage of art-making styles I want to accurately represent the overwhelming and overstimulated experiences I had, and continue to have, during this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This layering and usage of multiple textures, fabrics, and materials represents the muddling of time and the overwhelming experience of "crip time" in a chronically ill and mad bodymind.<sup>10</sup>

More specifically, I have chosen to bring in photographs of these art pieces, because, as Laura Lee writes in her memoir "A History of Scars," "as a writer I see trauma can't be captured in isolation – it can be measured only in images, quantified only in its aftereffects."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the experience of madness does not allow itself to fit into traditional academic structures.<sup>12</sup> This assemblage aims to highlight the dual actions of the destruction of language by physical pain,<sup>13</sup> where I am at a constant lack of words, and yet also drowning in the over-abundance of them. A symphony of ways to say *I am hurting, please listen*.

Yet also, a space where I have found joy in creating art, to find joy in my madness, and to find joy in “slow growth” or “minimums” as self-care.<sup>14</sup> A slow piecing back together of myself, the building of my support system, and the joy of finding mad and survivor communities during this pandemic.

This art was created intentionally, with every hand stitch, brush stroke, or the slow precise placement of collaged documents and photos onto my scanner in my bedroom. I reflected on my slow climb out from the shame and overwhelming sadness, anger, and pain from the abuse. I reflected on how I am able to offer care for myself, to connect with past and present me on my own terms.



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**Figure 1d. Trauma is memory, re-memory,<sup>15</sup> lack of memory. Trauma studies tells us that while we may forget, our bodies remember. How can we teach ourselves to also remember to heal, to care, to**

**love ourselves.** A set of three photographs taken by the author, of them filling a light tan felt doll with photocopied pages from their CSA group workbook, *The Courage to Heal Workbook*. From left to right: (1)

The felt doll is on Sav's bed surrounded by small purple sheets of paper of photocopied pages of *The Courage to Heal*.<sup>16</sup> The large bright yellow workbook is next to the doll, and there is red string on top of the doll; (2) A close up photo of the felt heart being filled with photocopied writing entries from the workbook.

These entries are comprised of Sav sharing their story of their abuse; (3) A photo of the felt doll next to shredded pages of the purple photocopied pages of *The Courage to Heal* before being used to fill the cavity of the doll.

## *Paranoia*

Your shadow has followed me since I was child.

Then, *You* were my grandfather. Or perhaps the old man who died in *Our* childhood home. Perhaps *You* are all of *Them*, lurking in the corner of mine and my sister's room.

*Us*

Huddled on her bed, the top bunk.



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**Figure 2a. I would rather have the ghosts haunt me.** A childhood photo of Sav with their sister obscured by translucent paper and a digital overlap with an art piece made by Sav that has the word "no" painted and written out in black in varying sizes and styles on white paper.

Scared.

Trying instead to focus on the local radio station playing from the stereo in *Our* room.

*Us*

Watched at night by the rows of porcelain dolls lined up on the top shelf until we begged our mom to move them.

I wonder where they ended up.

Probably in the basement among the towers of boxes and bins filled with dead relatives' belongings my mom won't bear to part with.

Haunting *Us* from beneath the foundation.

*Us*

Now living together again in Tucson in a different kind of haunted house. One full of family secrets and shame finally spoken. One with two inhabitants trying, willing, themselves to forget the abuse.

Paranoid.

*You* followed me here. Watching me at night, sidled next to the saguaro outside my window.

Now my sister is upstairs and there is no bed to share. *You* and *Him* and *Him* and...

Now there is too much pain between *Us*.

We yell, and try to hide in our Quarantine house. Everything is suffocating. There is too much noise and too much silence and too much weight between the two levels of our home. We now have too much in common, and yet nothing at all.

There *You* are, waiting still. The flash of shadow across the walls while I do the dishes, the crawling bugs on the floor – morphing in size as they move. I double check my room, my



closet, my bed. I feel crazy. I hear your nonsense whispers, and flashbacks to Bad memories. It is too much noise inside my head. I am being watched, enveloped.



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**Figure 2b. How does it feel to be enveloped, swallowed whole, by your trauma? To be trapped? Watched? Haunted?** From left to right: (1) A self-portrait of Sav taken in April 2020 in the "quarantine house." Sav is sitting on their bed facing their large window and wearing a gray sweatshirt and rose-colored underwear. Around the photo, Sav has used acrylic and oil-based paints to draw out shadows surrounding them coming in from the window. There are many plastic eyes adhered to the photo and around Sav, with a large red figure made with acrylic paint sitting next to them. (2) A photo taken of the "quarantine house." Many trees, desert brush, and cacti envelop the house and the sun is setting. Sav has used acrylic and oil-based paints to draw out a large shadow figure enveloping the house, with watching eyes. There is a red figure made with acrylic paint from within the shadow figure. The two photos taken by Sav have been painted over to depict the visuals and sensations felt by Sav. There are several photos from this series overlaid on top of each other to create a blurred and disorienting feeling.

I am transported back to my childhood room, and that closet that *He* made with the sliding doors that often fell off their hinges. The room is lit by the church parking lot lights next door. I am willing my eyes to say shut, hoping to fall asleep quickly.

Back to that sad apartment with [redacted] and the collapsing walls. With all my things in boxes, just like my mother's basement.

Except now I am the only dead one inside them.

Except now my mother is repulsed by this site—the day she moved me out, with everyone quickly walking up and down those rotting back stairs—My mother tells me she vomited in the parking lot, sick to her stomach at what has become of my life. Of what [redacted] had done to me.

Back to my Grandparent's home in the suburbs, hiding in a closet, my mother's childhood closet to be precise. Watching [redacted] outside the window. He has found me. I never gave him this address and he has found me. The home where that summer I slept in the same room my uncle lived in before he died. Some of his things are still on the dresser. The house with the closets full from my grandmother's hoarding. This house too is haunted, filled with grief hidden in mountains of things.

Back to the apartment with the ivy, and me, pacing the floors watching the windows waiting for *Him* to come home. Later, curled into a ball on the bed—please don't touch me. I'm sorry. Please don't yell. I had hoped this home would be different.

Back to the apartment in San Diego, sitting in my bathtub, flooded by memories I didn't know I had forgotten. Rewriting the childhood I had convinced myself I had.

Now, in *Our* Quarantine Home, with the rats in our air ducts and *You* outside my bedroom window—sometimes touched by the bright moonlight in the Sonoran Desert, and other times plunged into darkness among the javelinas, coyotes, and the two tarantulas who have burrowed in *Our* backyard next to the mesquite tree.

I am afraid I will be found again. I am afraid for my sister. I mourn the distance between *Us* now. I mourn the fact that we weren't given a childhood without pain. I mourn that I couldn't protect her.

I am reminded that I often would try to sleep in the hallway between all of *Our* rooms as a child. Listening to the breaths of the 7 other people in the house alongside the quiet radio chatter. Hoping to keep everyone safe and where they should be.

But they weren't safe.

And now here I sit.

Watching the walls, waiting for *You*.





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**Image 2c. Alone.** A collage of photos and artwork created by Sav over the past five years depicting their processing and healing from childhood sexual assault, domestic violence, and rape. In the background is an art piece Sav created in June 2018, where the word “no” is repeatedly painted and written in black over a white background. This piece is underneath a mixed media piece Sav created in August 2020. The words “remember,” “memory,” and “pain” are repeatedly written in the background over a multicolored watercolor painting. Over the top are differently sized black triangles made with construction paper glued over the top of the painting to conceal some of the words. Lastly, a black and white self-portrait taken in June 2017 of Sav sitting in their bathtub with their arms wrapped around themselves. Over the top, the word “no” is repeatedly written using red oil-based paint.

## Thoughts on anger.

### Cries

Do you hear me cry  
 Out loud trailing off  
 Can you help me<sup>17</sup>

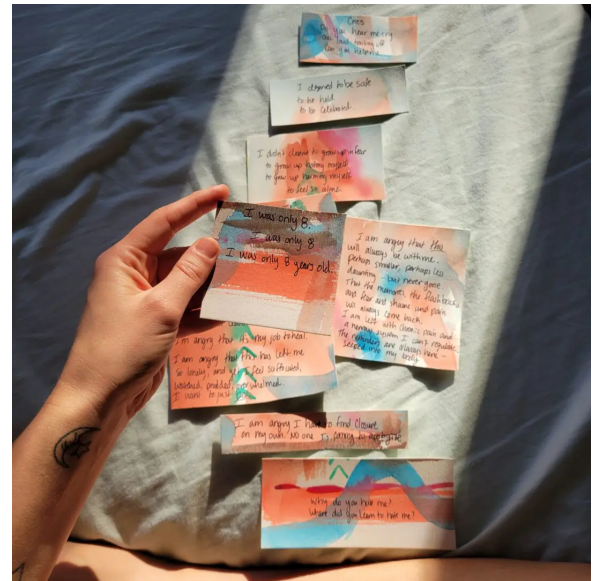
*I was only 8*  
*I was only 8*  
*I was only 8 years old.*

I deserved to be safe  
to be held  
to be celebrated.

I didn't deserve to grow up in fear  
to grow up hating myself  
to grow up harming myself  
to feel so alone.

*Do you hear me?*

*Do I exist for You at all?*



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**Figure 3a. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.**  
**Pain.** A photo of Sav holding up a small piece of watercolored paper that reads, "I was only 8 / I was only 8 / I was only 8 years old."

**I am angry.**

I am angry that I still want to die  
that everything always feels like too much.  
I thought the other day "I wish he had killed me then" –  
I'm angry that these thoughts won't leave.  
I'm angry that it's my job to heal.  
I am angry that this has left me so lonely, and yet,  
I feel suffocated, watched, prodded, overwhelmed.  
I want to just be.  
I am angry that *this* will always be with me.

Perhaps smaller, perhaps less daunting – but never gone.  
That the memories, the flashbacks, and fear and shame  
and pain will always come back.  
I am left with chronic pain and a nervous system I can't regulate.  
The reminders are always here – seeped into my body.

I am angry I have to find closure on my own.

No one is coming to apologize.

*Why do you hate me?  
Where did you learn to hate me?*

**Anger.**

I used to be so scared of anger because I  
had only known Anger like *Yours*.  
Anger that hurts  
Anger that destroys  
Anger that seeps into everything.  
I deserve to be angry.  
Angry for 8 year old me  
And me at 18, 19, 20, 21....  
I deserve to grieve those painful years.  
The time I lost because of *You*.  
I am reclaiming my body as my own  
I am taking back my anger.

**Anger.**

*Do you hear me?  
Do I exist for you at all?  
How did it feel to have someone so afraid  
of you?  
To hold my life in your hands?  
Did you feel like a God?  
Do you feel anything  
at all?  
How did it feel dragging  
my lifeless body  
Did you ever feel disgusted by your  
actions?  
By your desires?  
Is remorse in your orbit?  
Did you find your answers at the bottom  
of that whiskey bottle?  
Do you look at yourself in fear?  
When did you realize you never loved  
me?*

**Anger.**

Do you hear me grieve  
I am learning to be loud  
I will take the space I need.

**Anger.**

Do you hear me mourn  
I am no longer alone  
Does that frighten you?

I won't keep your secrets  
Anymore.

My shame, my fear, don't hold me down.  
*Your* lies no longer hold weight.

I exist beyond my trauma  
I exist beyond *You*.

My love for myself grows abundantly.



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**Figure 3b. A need for repetition.** A digital collage of photos taken by Sav of them mixing and holding different stanzas of the poem. You can see their hands from two transposed images overlapping each other. In the smaller photo on top of these transposed images, Sav is holding the last stanza of this poem, "My love for myself grows abundantly."

## Before/after

My therapist said that you can often tell in pictures when the abuse started by looking at someone's eyes.

That something has left, or perhaps, nestled in to stay.



## Before.

I remember as a kid going to my dad's optometry office and having him project our irises onto a small television screen. My siblings and I would all huddle around it imagining a new landscape among the green, blue, and brown textures in our eyes.

My eyes are the exact same gray/green as my father's . . . and his father's.

This fact is unsettling.



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**Figure 4a. Fear of inheritance.** A digital manipulation of two close-up photos of Sav's eyes. The two images are transposed on top of each other, mixing together and providing a shifting/blurred effect.

## After.

In middle school my dad started carrying colored contacts at his practice.

Dark greens, browns, vibrant blue, purple.

I wore these with an immense sense of happiness.

**Happy.**

I keep photos of me *before* surrounding the ornate full-length mirror in my room.

To connect to the joy of preschooler me on my hot pink bike with training wheels, rolling down the driveway of my childhood home wearing a 101 dalmatian hoodie—complete with actual dog ears. Happy.



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I see this now in my adult sparkly hot pink bike, which I ride for miles through the desert. Every month I go to a WTF ride,<sup>18</sup> and we ride together down the streets of Tucson—with music coming from the portable speaker someone has brought. I can see so many stars in the sky here. I know preschooler me would have loved this. Happy.



**Figures 4b & c. There's something here about the body remembering how to ride a bike and muscle memory, or inner-child work, or reframing my "after." Not all afters need to be sad. we can have so many afters that are full of happiness. I can re-write the green of my eyes to be connected to the ever-green bark of the palo verde tree, and start a new familial connection.** Top: a photo of Sav when they were in preschool, riding their bike in the driveway of their childhood home. There are many tall pine trees in the background. The bike is bright pink with a woven pink, white, blue, and purple basket, with pink streamers coming from the handles. Sav is wearing a Dalmatian hoodie under their puffy winter coat. They are smiling. Bottom: A photo taken of Sav from 2021 from a community ride in Tuscon, Arizona. Sav is standing with their pink sparkly bike. Behind them, there is an old town fountain and a community mural depicting the Sonoran Desert. Sav is wearing a white tank top, brown dress pants, green cloth mask, fanny pack, and baseball hat.

## Mending: a commitment to myself

Naomi Ortiz explained in a workshop I attended this last year that they don't use the term healing, but rather *mending*.

*Mending.*

This is me pulling myself back together<sup>19</sup> "after" trauma – if you believe that there is ever truly an "after" or a "post" that exists for post-traumatic stress disorder.

*Mending.*

This is me, reconnecting to myself without fear.

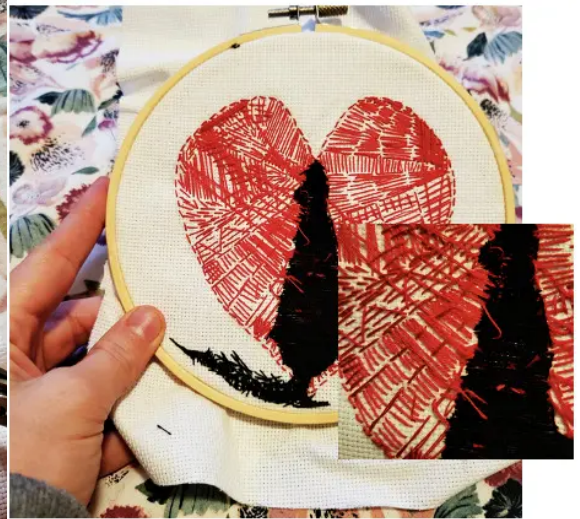
*Mending.*

This is me taking the time to care for myself, to listen to my needs.

This is me, still existing. Beautifully. Lovingly. Joyfully.



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**Figure 5: Rupture provides fertile grounds for new possibilities.** A set of three photos of an in-progress cross-stitch piece made by Sav of a large red heart. In the leftmost image, there are two superimposed images of scissors cutting the heart down the middle. In the middle image, the heart has been mended with black thread. In the rightmost image, small yellow flowers have been stitched along the edges of the black thread, and a yellow marigold flower has been sewn next to the heart.

# Moments of Joy During a Global Pandemic



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**Figure 6a. Grounded in movement.** A digital photo collage made by Sav of different places in Tucson in 2021. There are two overlapping photos, one of a large bird flying on Mount Lemmon, and another taken of the mountain range from the rooftop at Sav's therapists' office. On top of these photos to the right are two repeating pictures of a yellow and black butterfly on a red bird of paradise flower taken outside of Sav's therapist's office.



< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-6b\\_final.jpg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-6b_final.jpg) >

**Image 6b. Grounded in transformation.** A digital collage of photos of the saguaro growing outside of Sav's window at "the quarantine house" in Tucson taken in 2020. These photos vary in transparency and overlap each other, showing the varying stages of growth of the saguaro during the year. You are see the flowers growing, then blooming, then changing into "tuna" at the crown of the saguaro. These tuna then fall, open, and bright pink to the ground.





< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-6c\\_final.jpeg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-6c_final.jpeg) >

**Image 6c, Grounded in love.** A photo of Sav taken March 2020 on top of Mount Lemmon in Tucson with their dog Cassie. Cassie is a medium tan mixed-breed dog, they are standing on a boulder next to Sav, who is sitting next to Cassie. They are wearing black jeans, a tan jacket, and a green beanie. Their silver cane is positioned between their legs.



< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-1e\\_final-Sav-Schlauderaff.jpg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/image-1e_final-Sav-Schlauderaff.jpg) >

**Figure 7. My new foundation.** A photo taken by Sav of a light tan felt doll on Sav's bed, with pink and green floral sheets. Surrounding the doll are Sav's childhood diary, red thread, a red velvet pin cushion, *The Courage to Heal Workbook* and several books: *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, *Dirty River*, *A Burst of Light*, and the "hacked" DSM from *Open in Emergency*.

## Notes

1. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. (AK Press, 2018), 15. ↩



2. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, eds., *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (AK Press, 2020). ↵
3. Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (Harper Perrenial, 1990). ↵
4. I draw the use of *thoughtfeelings* from Laura I. Rendón's *Sentipensante* Pedagogy meaning of sensing/thinking and from work in a graduate course on Feminist Pedagogies with Dr. Irene Lara. Laura I. Rendón, *Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation* (Stylus Publishing, 2009). ↵
5. For "care web," see Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*; for "pod," see Mia Mingus, "Pods and Pod Mapping Worksheet," *Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective*, 2016, <https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/> < <https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/>> . ↵
6. "I am not ashamed to let my friends know I need their collective spirit—not to make me live forever, but rather to help me move through the life I have. But I refuse to spend the rest of that life mourning what I do not have." Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer," *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays* (Courier Dover Publications, 2017). ↵
7. "Who taught you to sort out your pain in silence?  
To stop crying so loud, too often, too much.  
When crip time is chronic, it means learning to live in a state of listening to your bodymind.  
This act of listening isn't easy.  
But does it have to be done alone?  
My chronic pain and illnesses have filled me up with aches and loneliness.  
But have also taught me how to tend and care for others.  
To listen to their pains.  
To help make them laugh.  
To sit, or lay, in crip time together.  
We experience so much of this in the same timespace, but I find myself retreating inward when I become overwhelmed.  
To hoard my pain until it becomes a hard rock in my stomach and weights down my limbs.  
Until my bruises bloom on the surface of my skin.  
My body shouts out my pain for me when I hold my words back.  
*I'm lonely.*  
*I need care.*  
*I too need someone to listen."*  
Originally presented at "Making Sense Conference" in 2020, drawing from Ellen Samuels, (2017).  
"Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684> < <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684>> . ↵
8. G. E. Anzaldúa, "Now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts," in *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. G. E. Anzaldúa and A. Keating (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 124–125. ↵
9. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020; Mimi Khúc, ed., "Open in Emergency," special issue, *Asian American Literary Review* 10, no. 2 (2019); Alison Kafer, "After crip, Crip Afters," in "Crip Temporalities," special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021), 415–434. ↵
10. Ellen Samuels, (2017). "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684> < <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684>> ; Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum. (2016). "Stories of Methodology: Interviewing Sideways, Crooked and Crip," in "Telling Ourselves Sideways, Crooked, and Crip," special issue, *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 5, no. 3 (2016): 18–56. ↵
11. Laura Lee, *A History of Scars: A Memoir* (Simon & Schuster: 2021), 50. ↵
12. Therí Pickens, *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke

University Press, 2019). ↵

13. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 4. ↵
14. Naomi Ortiz in *Sustaining Spirit: Self-Care for Social Justice* writes in the chapter "Slow Growth," "what would it be like to focus on the minimums? Those super small acts that have no immediate pay-offs but make a great difference in the long term?" Naomi Ortiz, *Sustaining Spirit: Self-Care for Social Justice* (Reclamation Press, 2018), 68. ↵
15. I am drawing this term from M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Alice Miller, *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Hurtful Parenting* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004); as well as Stephanie Foo's recent memoir, *What My Bones Know* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022). ↵
16. Davis, *The Courage to Heal Workbook* . ↵
17. This poem was originally written by me around 2003 for my mom while she was hospitalized. This poem was mailed to me by my mother during the summer of 2020, serving as a catalyst for these memories. ↵
18. Women, Trans, Femme. This is an acronym used by many cycling groups, in an effort to create a safer space for women and trans people to ride bikes together, away from cisgender men, who often overtake bike shops and cycling spaces. ↵
19. This imagery of putting oneself back together draws from Gloria Anzaldúa's essay "Now let us shift . . . the path of conocimiento . . . inner work, public acts." Anzaldúa writes about these cycles of trauma, the ruptures, the splitting of self, and the journey to put ourselves back together again (Coyolxauhqui Imperative) as part of the seven stages of conocimiento. ↵

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## Author Information



### Sav Schlauderaff

Sav Schlauderaff is a queer, trans, disabled writer, sometimes artist, sometimes academic. They are a PhD Candidate in Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Arizona, and their academic work exists within critical disability studies, feminist science and technology studies, new media studies, and health communication studies with a focus on storytelling and biohacking. Their other writing and creative work centers them telling their own life story and seeks to connect to other domestic abuse and rape survivors.

[View all of Sav Schlauderaff's articles.](#)



Sav Schlauderaff, "assembly required: textures of madness, joy, memory," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.21>

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## Review of *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* by micha cárdenas (Duke University Press)

by Shano (Hongyuan) Liang and Michael Anthony DeAnda

| Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** *Poetic Operations* by micha cárdenas critically engages theory, activist, art, design, and lived experience to develop “trans of color poetics” to disrupt systems marking trans of color lives for death.

**KEYWORDS** activism, design, algorithm, poetics, assemblage, trans of color

*Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media*. By micha cárdenas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 240 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1765-3. US List: \$25.95

micha cárdenas' *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* establishes “algorithmic analysis” as methods to consider contemporary digital media, artwork, and poetry that contribute to safety and survival strategies for trans people of color. Elaborating on feminist and queer of color critique, specifically Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Jasbir Puar's discussion of assemblage, cárdenas develops “algorithmic analysis” to tease apart the systems and operations of society and culture, intervening in thinking of these as monolithic. cárdenas begins by discussing algorithms through computer programming and extends this thinking to codes that structure culture and society. For cárdenas, algorithmic analysis is a method for discovering and examining the complexity of cultural systems to better understand the processes that structure components, which can include people, cultural artifacts, tools, civilizing structures, performances, and behaviors, to name only a few, to tease out the logics embedded in such things as art, identity, and acts of violence. She defines three operations for trans of color poetics—“the cut,” “the shift,” and “the stitch,”—to analyze and disrupt the cultural violence targeting trans people of color. The book includes an introduction that proposes the concept and method of algorithmic analysis, five chapters that discuss trans of color

poetics through theory and practice—with each chapter focused on one of three operations—and a concise, summative conclusion.

In the first chapter, “Trans of Color Poetics,” through her analyses and discussion of Esdras Parra’s untitled poem about shapeshifting, Giuseppe Campuzano’s project *El Museo Travesti de Peru* (TMP), cárdenas’s own art piece *Pregnancy*, and Kai Cheng Thom’s work, cárdenas uses algorithmic analysis and poetry written by trans women of color to describe the decolonial potentials of trans of color poetics. This chapter provides foundational understanding for its titular methods by identifying and explaining the operations of the cut, the shift, and the stitch (all of which cárdenas expands on in subsequent chapters). These poetic operations afford possibilities for trans people of color’s survival in a world that has marked them for erasure (42). “The cut,” which breaks problems down into operable parts, gesturing towards “autonomy, disrupting surveillance, and [enabling] opacity” (45) is further elaborated in chapter 2, “The Decolonial Cut.” In this chapter, cárdenas elaborates on the cut through her discussion of “We Already Know,” a performance in Sao Paulo of eight bodies moving with intention through public space at a shared speed to disrupt mediation. This performance extends a trans of color critique by using group choreography (which is algorithmic and procedural), affectual networks of support, and movement to cut into surveillance systems used to mark bodies for erasure.

In chapter 3, “The Shift,” cárdenas discusses this part of the repertoire of trans of color poetics through case studies of Janelle Monáe’s work and cárdenas’s own code poetry. As cárdenas explains, the shift here, corresponding to the variables in an algorithm with mutable values, is an operation of modulating one’s perceptibility by changing one’s form, location, or appearance. This corresponds to “trans of color” as an identity and category in flux. Focusing principally on racism, sexism, and violence against trans people of color, cárdenas examines shifting as an algorithm of performative optics and perception that is practiced daily by many trans women of color. Theorizing from this practice, she argues that the ability to modulate gender at will points to a future in which gender can be a multidimensional and multispectral concept. While necropolitical logics reinforce gender binaries to control trans of color lives, limiting expression and freedom, shifting helps trans people of color navigate necropolitics. In particular, trans of color poetics offers the ability to shift between being visible and invisible at will, which is crucial for the survival of trans people of color. In an environment that seeks to control one’s visibility, the shift offers the ability to be opaque to information surveillance, to move from highly visible to invisible, to be nonidentifiable to recognition systems of authority, and to go unnoticed when passing through a dangerous situation.

Chapter 4, “The Experience of Shifting,” provides examples of how trans of color poetics as a method transforms experiences into digital artworks. Through cárdenas’s digital game

*Redshift and Portalmetal* and the digital game *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice, the author illustrates how shifting personal experiences into poetic algorithms reaches beyond voyeuristic empathy toward acts of solidarity. The looping algorithmic gestures in *Mainichi* (which translates to “everyday”) that emphasize day-to-day life point to many potentials for designing interactive media through trans of color poetics. This looping algorithmic form represents what cárdenas terms “the incomprehensibility of violence” to underscore that the violence is potentially infinite and repeated every day. Any choice the player makes in *Mainichi* will always lead them to encounter some form of violence, and the only escape is to walk away from this game. The game also presents a design of the intersectional experience to players that involves the teaching, learning, and shaping of algorithms for trans of color survival. In *Redshift*, cárdenas argues that “transreal” methods of storytelling—blending truth from the author’s own intersectional experiences of crossing borders, science fiction, recorded performances showcasing the designer, and other mixed media—is a practice of shifting through which designers share experiences of resilience. Furthermore, cárdenas describes how, through workshops and performances of *Redshift*, she calls players to action beyond the screen, moving beyond empathy and calling for acts of solidarity with indigenous people.

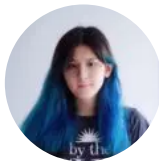
Following her call for solidarity, chapter 5 introduces the last operation of trans of color poetics—“the stitch”—and draws on several projects to exemplify how artists use stitching to create opacity, evade surveillance, and build solidarity. The stitch involves “using one entity to connect two formerly separate entities” (134), providing a clear method to address and reenvision relationships between the ideological and the material. Reflecting on Adam Harvey’s projects “Stealth Wear” and “CV Dazzle,” and Zach Blas’s project “Facial Weaponization Suite,” cárdenas exemplifies how the stitch provides stealth and safety through the adornment of clothing, demonstrating how this method combines variables together into cohesive units. These artists’ works attempt to disrupt surveillance by stitching together clothes, masks, and digital applications. In addition, cárdenas reflects again on the Sao Paulo performance “We Already Know” to further demonstrate how stitching generates decolonial justice by fostering solidarity between groups and envisioning strategies for connecting communities across borderlines of nationality, gender, race, and sexual identification.

We wholeheartedly endorse this book for scholars and practitioners interested in trans studies, design, digital media, and technology. cárdenas’s reflections and self-criticality of her own projects are especially valuable for the design classroom. In addition, the concept of algorithmic analysis affords potentials for interventions in the studies of identity, systemic structures, and culture, and provides insight into the different forms of trans of color study, which deserves more attention in trans media and queer theory. Importantly, this book models theory developed from and for trans of color existence and models how

scholars must critically reflect on how our theories have ramifications for people's lives. cárdenas develops the cut, the shift, and the stitch to celebrate trans lived experiences in her theorization. Extending current discussions across trans, queer, and feminist studies, this book speaks to the importance of trans studies, and the necessity for incorporating race into trans studies. *Poetic Operations* provides methods for analysis and design that invite exciting and innovative projects that engage in decolonial trans of color survival and celebration.

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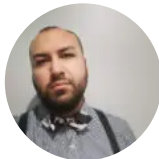
## Author Information



### Shano (Hongyuan) Liang

Shano (Hongyuan) Liang is a researcher and PhD student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute interested in games studies, queer/trans studies, and game design theories. She is a game concept & gameplay designer, multi-skill game developer, 2D/3D game artist, game audio composer, and indie-game developer. She founded Wuhan KBoom Network Technology Co.LTD, a board game company in Wuhan China, dedicated to the general study and development of board games and avant-garde gameplay.

[View all of Shano \(Hongyuan\) Liang's articles.](#)



### Michael Anthony DeAnda

Michael Anthony DeAnda is a professional lecturer in Game Design at DePaul University who uses game design as research praxis to explore the intersections of games, queerness, and culture, considering the intimacies between LGBTQ and Latine lived experiences and games. DeAnda has published in *Technical Communications Quarterly*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Convergence*, and *Widerscreens*.

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## Article details

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## Review of *Magical Habits* by Monica Huerta (Duke University Press)

by Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** In *Magical Habits*, Monica Huerta delivers a labyrinthine and whimsical study on the intersection between stories, race, place, and archive. The author's lived experience as a second-generation Mexican immigrant living in Chicago is dissected to bring about an original understanding of how race complicates notions of history, capitalism, and narratives of the self. The reader's curiosity will be piqued by *Magical Habits'* experimental structure, and by the author's decision to abandon traditional academic writing in favor of an intimate prose that fluctuates between storytelling and critical thinking.

**KEYWORDS** critical race theory, literature, Chicanx studies

*Magical Habits*. By Monica Huerta. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2021, 191 pp. (ebook) ISBN 9781478021483.

Monica Huerta's intricate and deeply intimate *Magical Habits* takes the reader on an inventive study of the links between stories, race, place, and archive. Huerta's fabulation of her experience growing up as a second generation Mexican immigrant in Chicago, as well as her academic endeavors as a researcher and professor, bring about a provocative understanding of how race impacts space, history, and capitalism. *Magical Habits'* architecture is itself an experiment in archival exploration. Huerta challenges the reader to abandon traditional academic writing's framework to embrace her prose, which jumps skillfully from storytelling to cultural and critical thinking. As such, the style itself becomes part of the author's demonstration. Huerta and the press play with layout and fonts actively disturb reader's expectations, challenging the hegemony of such styles in academia.

Following a long established tradition in Chicanx thinking, Huerta employs autoethnography and fiction to produce knowledge. The book is divided into twelve sections, some of which include subsections, titled with year numbers, that are in appearance isolated fragments but could be read as a parallel story of the narrator's life. The book covers not only her lived experience, it also draws from her grandparents' and parents' travels and words. Rather than a narrative of the author's thought process, the text presents objects and

documents (photographs, restaurant menus, imagined dialogues, radio transcripts, personal emails, internet reviews, and even social media screenshots and messages) that come alive through small details, such as the images on the menus from her parent's restaurant, that take on historical significance. As such, a linear account of the book would not do justice to its innovative structure.

Descriptions of places threaded throughout the book help the reader navigate Huerta's train of thought. It becomes the site where the very idea of meaning is challenged. In section 6, "whether wisdom," Huerta invites the reader to her childhood home, and in section 8, "when courts of love have cash registers," she recounts her and her family's moves and how they adapted to their new surroundings. These personal sections which border on memoir writing enact the more abstract observations from other sections, bringing them back to concrete phenomena. Section 9, "auctions," offers up the retelling of the transformation of a Chinese restaurant into a Mexican one, exploring how the process of migrating under capitalism is much more than a change in place.

The preface, section 3, "disciplines and disciples," and the final section 12, "choreography," are explorations of how habits of thought become habits of living that perpetuate settler-capitalistic habits of life and how they can be rendered inoperative through storytelling that subverts said turns of thought. Section 10 touches on the transformative powers of language, promoting ambivalence as a possible site of self-knowledge. Section 11, "after hypervigilance," addresses the discomfort produced by language amongst immigrants and their children, and the final section also points to forgetting as one of the dangers of not facing that discomfort.

Huerta's approach to language establishes a relationship between identity and politics, and elicits a rethinking of viewpoint in academia, contributing to the debate on situated knowledge already at the forefront of feminist critical thinking. In section 5, "heartbreak as praxis," Huerta posits that a way of knowing (here, that of immigrants) can be learned by those not affected, and she fosters empathy through a writing style that is not descriptive but performative. This is also the case in her analysis of aphorisms in section 4 and the subsection, "the Quene. A Mervilos and Magiquall Tale of epistemological Mischief, Wherein there are revealed no secretes," a parodic fairy tale through which the author recounts the struggle of producing knowledge in rigid academic structures.

Sections 1, "the synthesis problem," and 2, "fabulations," rethink the "I" as a question asked to history, to nostalgia, and to archival practices. Huerta questions the hierarchies established between recognized history and histories by highlighting the importance of everyday life in analyzing capitalism and postcoloniality, as opposed to big political turns in legislation that affect the Latinx community. She reviews her grandfather's involvement in the Cristero rebellion in Mexico as well as her parents' participation in the wave of



immigration from Mexico to the United States—more specifically to Chicago—and how these newcomers transformed the landscape of the city. Section 7, "BEFORE AND AFTER," delves deeper into this idea, revealing how the emergence of Taco Bell had an impact both in her life and for Latino communities and restaurant owners. Her personal accounts are intermingled with other scholars' work on the bracero program, to provide further context.

Ultimately, the strength of Huerta's work lies more in her innovative approach to methodology and the acquisition knowledge than in the facts related. This book will definitely benefit students and researchers in the fields of feminism and gender studies, critical race theory, Chicanx studies, and Latinx literature. It could also enlighten students wishing for more creative liberty in academia, as it clearly demonstrates the the political implications of academic writing, the hierarchies hidden behind the text, and how to deconstruct them. This book would thus benefit any young person searching for their voice in research in the aforementioned fields.

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## Author Information

### Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez

Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez is a PhD candidate at Sorbonne Université Faculté des Lettres. Her writing and research is broadly concerned with Mexican media, gender, and the affectivity of violence. Her PhD thesis deals with narcotelenovela's gendered order and the political implications of melodrama. She is the recipient of the 2022–2023 Fulbright-García Robles scholarship.

[View all of Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez's articles.](#)

### Article details

Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez, "Review of *Magical Habits* by Monica Huerta (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

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## Review of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* by Mariame Kaba (Haymarket Books)

by Esteban Kelly | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** What if social transformation and liberation isn't about waiting for someone else to come along and save us? What if ordinary people have the power to collectively free ourselves? In this timely collection of essays and interviews, Mariame Kaba reflects on the deep work of abolition and transformative political struggle. With chapters on seeking justice beyond the punishment system, transforming how we deal with harm and accountability, and finding hope in collective struggle for abolition, Kaba's work is deeply rooted in the relentless belief that we can fundamentally change the world. As Kaba writes, "Nothing that we do that is worthwhile is done alone" (172).

**KEYWORDS** Black Lives Matter, justice, abolition, organizing, accountability

*We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. By Mariame Kaba. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021. pp. 240 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-64259-525-3. US List: \$16.95.

In June 2020, as regular people flooded the streets of the world in a visceral outcry against the parade of Black death at the hands of police, voices of abolitionist leaders soared to the front pages of global media—at least for a few weeks. Their call was to defund and ultimately abolish the police and the institutions that both feed and depend on them. There's a large chasm between righteous anger at viral murders by police and the abolitionist horizon of a world in which harm is addressed within communities—and punishment, policing, and retributions are no longer necessary.

The majority of those marching were only newly awakened to the extensiveness of the prison industrial complex and its inherent racialized violence and dehumanization. Still, they clamored in good faith to amplify the calls of Black movement leaders to build a world emancipated from prisons and police. That so-called allyship had a limited half-life, with

many returning to some middle ground, unsure what it was that gripped them in the first place, and why we couldn't merely introduce some sensible reforms without trashing the whole criminal-legal system. Others stayed curious and prolonged their engagement with deeper political education to explore abolitionist frameworks, transformative justice, and more relational forms of organizing. For this latter group, the most cogent wisdom guiding this awakening came from the ever-humble Mariame Kaba, assuredly one of our most influential and pragmatic visionaries of prison abolition.

*We Do This 'Till We Free Us* collects the breadcrumb trail of abolitionist theory and practice that Kaba has laid out for most of the last decade—in op-eds and essays, snippets of podcast interviews, questions, lists, considerations for policy changes—to hasten the metamorphosis of our society to one where healing and justice are centered and carceral logics are no longer. The book compiles such nuggets into one omnibus resource to guide the reader on a journey wherein clarity and pragmatism belie the complexity of inhabiting a world without punishment, policing, and prisons. Getting there is not so simple. Kaba's instructional insights come from a rigorous commitment to the work of abolition; her prose is constructed upon an autobiographical latticework of political economic theory and community organizing strategy that produces the book's titular premise. This intimate, everyday work of fighting to free our people from the carceral system informs our strategy and vision for abolition itself.

Part I of the collection, "So You're Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist," begins with the book's most recent piece. Kaba speaks directly to those beginning their journey of learning and unlearning. Up front, she counters a common pro-policing concern about "never [calling] the cops if my life is in serious danger" by positing "why do we have no other well-resourced options?" (2–3). She rightly starts by pulling the veil back on how our whole world is built around false logics of "brave and effective policing." Like the movements in which she's embedded, she pushes the reader to denaturalize our status quo.

In Part II, "There Are No Perfect Victims," Kaba probes the complicated nature of accountability and transformative justice through the cases of Marissa Alexander and Cyntoia Brown. She helps us see how an essentializing "perfect-victim" narrative can become weaponized. Kaba reverses the "cancel culture" frame to show how the real cancel culture targets poor folks of color without access to legal and social services in the face of retaliation from the state or bosses.

Abolition does not imply a shirking back from accountability. By Part III, "The State Can't Give Us Transformative Justice," we find Kaba urging us to carve out some distance between official outcomes of criminal legal proceedings and our own sense of transformative justice, even in cases of "victory." As a prominent example of not reducing

accountability to any one model or approach, the book considers the response to murder at the hands of the police and FBI. Kaba points to ways that even within the existing system, our movements need to pluralize demands for accountability to “many possible collective responses to a clear injustice” (63). She and essay coauthor Andrea Ritchie affirm that we can “fully support demands for accountability for Breonna [Taylor]’s death,” without defaulting to prosecution and imprisonment (63). They list a series of responses from uprisings: firing the officers, banning such officers from holding positions of power, demanding that the family receive compensation and healing, and, of course, defunding the police.

This sentiment bridges to Part IV, where Kaba outlines “Reforms for and Against Abolition.” If there is a nucleus of the book, it is surely this section’s structuring frameworks. It opens with her well-nigh viral 2014 *Truthout* list of “Police Reforms You Should Always Oppose.” < <https://truthout.org/articles/police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose/>> She then explores several different contexts ranging from policing in the nineteenth century, the school-to-prison pipeline in Chicago, and the spectacles of police militarization and mass surveillance. In an interview with Jeremy Scahill, she reminds us that prison itself is a reform: We haven’t always had prisons. They emerged “as a reaction to corporal punishment” (72). Earlier, she mentions that for most people first encountering ideas of abolition, “prisons, policing, and surveillance are part of a natural order that simply cannot be undone” (21).

Kaba has the reader consider how strange it is that police are at the center of our society. Kaba lays this out plainly in her reprinted June 2020 *New York Times* op-ed where she states “Police officers don’t do what you think they do. They spend most of their time responding to noise complaints, issuing parking and traffic citations, and dealing with other non-criminal issues” (14). To put this in perspective, Kaba draws on the work of Alex Vitale, the coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, specifying that “the vast majority of police officers make one felony arrest a year. If they make two, they’re cop of the month” (14).

As Kaba reminds us throughout the book, such context is obscured by a carceral state that frantically champions police as the frontline of a criminal legal system, feeding the prison-industrial complex in the name of security. Noise violations and traffic citations have very little to do with the propagandized premise of policing which—upon closer inspection—could easily be addressed by alternative means. Kaba shows how that point is often glossed over when politicians and so-called police unions seamlessly swap out “security” for “safety” in the public justification for their presence and ongoing depletion of municipal coffers (95). Safety, being a matter distinguished from security, would need to account for deeper problems of harm and violent transgression. It just so happens that Kaba’s insights

are exactly what would allow us to get at the roots of safety—positing that our world would indeed be safer if we did away with ineffectual punitive structures and re-centered our lives around a theory and practice of transformative justice.

The collection of essays, interviews, and reprinted conversations from her clear articulation of this politics introduces readers to a series of portals—glimpses into the sundry worlds heralded by abolitionist practice. But these portals are not just about what's on the other side. Kaba's vision is indispensable precisely insofar as it remains firmly anchored in the conditions in which we find ourselves. Here, she reminds us to balance our fraught conditions and bleak outlooks with rigorous organizing; hope is a discipline and solidarity is a verb (26).

In Part V, "We Must Practice and Experiment," Kaba emphasizes the importance of pairing abolitionist theory with on-the-ground organizing. She names "abolitionist care" as a frame for mutual aid and uplifts defense campaigns that help more people realize how individual stories can be emblematic of systemic injustice (111). She discerns that even if we know intrinsically that Black lives matter, an abolitionist practice has to *make* Black lives matter by "[defining] the vision" through direct demands in relation to specific and urgent issues (105).

Part VI, the aptly titled "Transforming How We Deal with Harm and Violence," articulates the discipline that a principled abolitionist politics necessitates, e.g. sitting with "failure and mistakes [as] part of a process" (142). Here, Kaba frames transformative justice as an attempt to deconstruct dichotomies, such as those between "victims and perpetrators" or what is and isn't "restorative" or "transformative." She describes how our communities instead "[try] to figure out how we respond to violence and harm in a way that doesn't cause more violence and harm." The work of transformative justice is "many different kinds of things, to many different kinds of people, who use it many different kinds of ways" (149).

Her blueprint—transforming ourselves, experimenting with new collective structures, reducing contact between people and the criminal-legal system, and changing everything (beyond just the criminal-legal system)—gets at the multiple scales we each have to simultaneously organize on (4-5). Considering W. E. B. Du Bois' "abolition democracy" today brings us back to the fundamental political-economic questions of ownership and control. Similarly, Kaba's call to change everything speaks to the demand for a new economy implicit within abolitionism—an economy that also decenters carceral logics and centers collective care. Recent fascist violence, book banning, and white scaremongering of critical race theory should remind us that, absent collective political-economic power to put up a fight, mobilizations like the 2020 uprisings will recede and face repressive backlashes reminiscent of those of the 1890s and 1970s. Current conditions only heighten the need to build the kind of abolitionist collective power Kaba describes.

In Part VII, Kaba concludes with the reminder “Community matters. Collectivity matters” (175). She amplifies a tenet from her father, “Everything Worthwhile is Done with Other People,” contrasting between the disposition of an activist—meaning someone who broadly acts on a political issue—versus an organizer, whose actions must inherently be accountable to someone else (180). The question comes down to the process of “building a million different little experiments” (166), and as a tweet she cites from @ZenMarxist asserts, “a fundamental expression of trust in the power of conscious collective effort” (167).

While the challenge to change ourselves and to change everything is overwhelming (a challenge which will undoubtedly necessitate deeper collective care), there is both no greater joy and no other option than the work of affirming life. Thanks to *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, visions of a world without police and prisons are refined with examples of tools and approaches for getting there. What Kaba makes abundantly clear through her words and actions is that there is no way but forward, together, toward the work.

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## Author Information



### Esteban Kelly

Esteban Kelly is the Executive Director for the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), and is a worker-owner and co-founder of AORTA (Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance), a worker co-op that builds capacity for social justice projects through intersectional training and consulting.

Esteban is a compassionate leader and visionary strategist who inspires organizers by drawing on science fiction, social theory, and collective liberation. His leadership in abolitionist frameworks of transformative justice stems from 15 years of organizing with Philly Stands Up! (PSU), a collective addressing sexual assault by working directly with people who caused harm to implement survivor-informed plans for accountability. He both writes on and narrates this in the anthology and audiobook *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*.

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## Review of *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* by La Marr Jurelle Bruce (Duke University Press)

by Liz Miller | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind* offers a poignant study of what author La Marr Jurelle Bruce calls “mad methodology,” extending care and consideration to Black artists historically, fictionally, and contemporaneously rendered mad by oppressive anti-Black capitalist discursive practices. Reflecting on the creative practices of Buddy Bolden, Nina Simone, Lauryn Hill, and Dave Chappelle, among others, Bruce provides a clear-cutting analysis of the ways normative cultural logics work to figure Black art and protest as inherently mad.

**KEYWORDS** anti-Blackness, disability, Black studies, race, methodology, mad studies

*How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. By La Marr Jurelle Bruce. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 345 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 979-1-4780-1087-6. US List: \$28.95.

La Marr Jurelle Bruce's *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* “is simple solidarity born of likeness and shared experience” (234). Here, at the end of the book, the author discloses his own encounters with madness and shares his identity as a Mad Black scholar “writing a mad black book while braving an antiblack-antimad world” (234). *How to Go Mad* is a love story, a potent reflection on a few of the many Black creative minds who have innovated art forms and fashioned the trajectory of history, while having their “sanity” called into question by normative, white, anti-Black, anti-Mad audiences and institutions.

An important note on language: it has become common in many academic and activist spaces to capitalize marginalized identity categories, like *Black* or *Mad* as a sign of respect. *The New York Times*, for example, takes its cue from W.E.B. Du Bois in electing to capitalize the “B” in Black (Coleman, 2020 <

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>> ). *How to Go Mad* breaks with such practices, and for good reason:

I use a lowercase *b* because I want to emphasize an *improper* blackness; a blackness that is a 'critique of the proper'; a blackness that is collectivist rather than individualistic; a blackness that is 'never closed and always under contestation'; a blackness that is ever-unfurling rather than rigidly fixed; a blackness that is neither capitalized nor propertized via the protocols of Western grammar; a blackness that centers those who are typically regarded as lesser and *lower cases*. (6)

Such is the undercurrent running through the text.

Chapter 1, "Mad is a Place," connects madness and Blackness through multiple experiential nodes. For example, Bruce mobilizes Foucault's "ship of fools" and Hortense Spillers' work to conceptualize what he calls a "mad diaspora," an "emergence of unprecedented diasporic subjectivities, ontologies, and possibilities that transgress national and rational norms" (2–3). *How to Go Mad* is fundamentally a book about ontology and a mad methodology that compassionately attunes to the lived experiences of folks residing at the intersection of Mad and Black, however those terms may be defined historically, culturally, institutionally, communally, and personally. The work of this chapter is to call into question Western modernity's emphasis on rationalism as akin to "sanity" and to focus instead on "those purported rants, raves, rambles, outbursts, mumbles, stammers, slurs, gibberish sounds, and unseemly silences that defy the grammars of Reason" (9). Because institutional Reason has historically steeped itself in anti-Black, saneist discourse, Bruce finds it only natural that those experiencing such structural violence would "go mad" or rage against the machine of racial capitalism. His mad methodology "recognizes mad persons as critical theorists and decisive protagonists in struggles for liberation" (9).

The next chapter, "'He Blew His Brains Out through His Trumpet': Buddy Bolden and the Impossible Sound of Madness," encourages readers to listen to the traces of Mad music reverberating across time. Bolden, a Black radical creator of the late-nineteenth century who stepped out of tune, so to speak, inaugurated the figure of the *mad jazzman*, one consciously taken up by later musical artists, including Sun Ra and Charles Mingus. Highlighting the self-mythologizing and queer speculation undergirding the latter men's lives and careers, *How to Go Mad* dexterously showcases the tools of Bruce's mad methodology: "looking and listening for the phantoms, otherworldly beings, and disembodied voices that speak in their narratives; discerning where disclosures of pathology are also articulations of philosophy; and extending radical compassion to both men" (60). Sun Ra, for example, presented himself as a space and time traveler, a self-narrative that troubles Western reason and calls into question its emphasis on whiteness and normalcy. This section thus provides readers with a concrete examination of lessons

gleaned through listening to Black madness across history, uncovering a philosophical orientation that invites creative, perhaps eccentric, relations to the status quo.

Chapter 3, "The Blood-Stain Bed," similarly reflects on rationalist society, this time in analyzing the violence engendered in those who have been broken down by subjugation and trauma. Eva Canada, the protagonist of Gayle Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), kills a lover after suffering a life of constant sexual abuse. Rather than condone such an act of murder, Bruce asserts "our primary impulse must not be to discard Eva or retaliate against her—but rather to abolish the structures that erect and uphold the blood-stained bed" (99).

Madness begets a knowledge of those structures that must be overthrown, if only we are willing to extend compassion to individuals experiencing that madness—including ourselves. Importantly, Bruce's compassion is not "*moderate* compassion, *ordinary* compassion, or *easy* compassion" (99), as evidenced by his repudiation of anti-Black normative structures rather than outright rejection of the character Eva. It is a *radical* compassion that acknowledges Black trauma, sympathizing with an individual's circumstances even if one does not condone violent action.

We see such lessons taken up again in the following chapter, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Mad Black Woman," particularly in Bruce's emphasis on the inextricable link between madness and Blackness: "To be black in the thick of antiblack worlds is a condition of such trauma, such chaos, such strangeness, such wonder, such alterity, such uncertainty, such antagonism, that it often feels mad" (137). Importantly, though, *How to Go Mad* posits that instead of passing as sane in a crazymaking world, folks might re-envision the very parameters of madness as something one "can claim, wield, and *do*; something that one might learn to do *well*; something that might be adopted as methodology and praxis" (137, emphasis in original).

The remaining three chapters of *How to Go Mad* provide discussions of what this new mad methodology entails—not just listening to and respecting the voices of the Mad, but Black folks' harnessing of the madness imbued through contact with white supremacy. Bruce presents Lauryn Hills's "embrace of madness for song-making, self-making, and worldmaking" (140) and Dave Chappelle's embrace of paranoia, despite its medical pathologizing, as a necessary mode of survival—two examples of many of "black people going mad in order not to lose their minds or their lives" (193).

Finally, Bruce, via discussion of the musical stylings of Nina Simone, Kendrick Lamar, Frank Ocean, and others, suggests the concept of *madtime*. This term "signifies various modes of doing time and feeling time coinciding with spasms and rhythms of madness. . . . It tears calendars, smashes clocks, ignores calls for timeliness," thereby defying "the Eurocentric, heteronormative, capitalist, rationalist clock-time that reigns in the modern West" (204). In this last chapter, "Songs in Madtime: Black Music, Madness, and Metaphysical

Syncopation," Black radical creativity in the form of music provides blueprints for living out of key with anti-Black, anti-Mad realities.

The book encourages attunement to practices of mad knowledge-making for the sake of self-preservation, survival, activism, and scholarship in a world that continues to seek the destruction of that which is not white, able-minded, and heteronormative. Bruce, fortunately, shows us an alternative ontology, one that attempts to productively grapple with "black rage," "at once a symptom of antiblack trauma, a defense against antiblack trauma, and a mighty force in battles against anti-blackness" (24). Importantly, this rage revels in creativity, madness in all its forms, community, and love.

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### Liz Miller

Liz Miller conducts research and writing on rhetoric, composition pedagogy, and disability studies. She is currently finishing up her PhD at the Ohio State University.

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## Review of *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* by Eric A. Stanley (Duke University Press)

by Kerry Keith | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** Eric A. Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* delves into the spectacle and disappearance that racialized anti-trans/queer violence produces. Stanley's method is archival. By putting surveillance tapes, letters, films, and direct actions side by side, they trace structuring logics of modernity while emphasizing trans/queer practices that have and do escape such violent worlds. While this book underscores violence, hurt, and loss, it is more accurate to classify it as a text that tenaciously holds onto the possibility of livable worlds otherwise.

**KEYWORDS** violence, surveillance, queer, race, trans studies

*Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable*. By Eric A. Stanley. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2021. 184 pp. (paperback). ISBN:978-1-4780-1421-8. US List \$24.95

Eric A. Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* delves into the spectacle and disappearance that racialized anti-trans/queer violence produces. Violence does not have a singular meaning in the text, as it sometimes appears as a "force that ends life" and sometimes as "the only way life may unfold" (7). Violence is an undoing; the subtitle's "structuring antagonism" refers to the ways that such undoing occurs at the level of lives subject to violent events. At the same time, the book unpacks how undoing can be leveraged towards unraveling modernity's oppressive structures.

In a move that will be unsurprising to readers familiar with their writings, Stanley denounces the state as the primary vehicle for recognition, inclusion, and safety. Instead, their meditation on racialized and gendered violence posits how the foundational "inconsistencies" of liberal democracy steadies its hold (11). The apprehending power of

liberal rights only further valorizes the United States' socio-legal structure that perpetuates by rendering certain lives unlivable. While this book underscores violence, hurt, and loss, it is more accurate to classify it as a text that tenaciously dwells in the possibility of livable worlds otherwise.

Stanley's atmospheric analysis—the structures and molecules that envelop trans/queer life—enables them to illuminate diffuse scenes of simultaneous trans/queer presence and erasure. Stanley draws from archives of anti-trans/queer violence that traverse a range of times and places in the US. They attend to objects such as letters, films, direct actions, and surveillance tapes to produce a cadence of anti-trans/queer violence and the “ungovernable,” a legal designation which Stanley redefines as an analytics and ability to escape or evade state surveillance and capture. Stanley tethers their theoretical interventions to Frantz Fanon's corpus by emphasizing that violence structures the here and now, and by embracing the destructive as a means to lay ground for radical changes. Engaging Fanon's insights for trans/queer theory, Stanley urges a move away from recognition within liberal democracy towards more livable existences, and—to quote Fanon—to grasp that “the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life” in service of abolitionist worlds to come.<sup>1</sup>

Across its four chapters, *Atmospheres of Violence* deliberately recounts violent scenes asserting a refusal to look away. Stanley is clear that the point of narrating such scenes is to ensure they do not repeat. The first chapter questions how instances of racialized anti-trans/queer “overkill”—the brutalization of a body beyond the point of death—indicates an expression of ontological nonexistence. Following Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Stanley points out that there is no self/Other battle in the deadly scenes depicted, but that such excessive violence structures how “specific bodies in specific times” take the place of being nothing (39). Furthermore, because the deaths depicted in this chapter are caused and/or exacerbated by the police, the state itself produces anti-trans/queer atmospheric violence and, as such, can never be an antidote to it.

The second chapter shifts from the overt violence of overkill to the biocapital of blood by questioning its exchanges, extractions, and exclusions for queer folks. Stanley emphasizes how blood operates as a site of accumulation under the logics of racial capitalism and colonial occupation, where value, commodified life, and dead labor is produced by venipuncture. Biocapital, and its attendant racialized and sexualized production of difference, is made all the more salient as Gilead Sciences, the sole producer of the HIV prophylactic medication PrEP in the US, profits from an “abstracted consumer to come” (61). This abstraction takes place in material anti-trans and racist economic barriers which prohibit access to PrEP for many, particularly trans people of color.

The third chapter examines the scopic regimes of surveillance tapes, filmic representations, and the potential of opacity as a way of seeing. Stanley's own experience as a filmmaker, and their insights on representation (as also evidenced in the anthology *Trap Door* they coedited) shines through in this chapter. Guiding the reader through the CCTV taped police beating of Duanna Johnson, a black trans woman, in a Memphis county jail intake room, Stanley discusses the edges, frames, gazes, omissions, and assumptions of this video capture. In contrast to optical capture, Stanley concludes the chapter by reading Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel's film, *Happy Birthday Marsha*, as disengaging from a cis gaze and embracing Eduard Glissant's theory of opacity.

The fourth chapter carefully discusses suicide in atmospheres of violence (94). Stanley dislodges queer/trans suicide from individualizing pathologies in order to situate suicide not only in terms of survival that is unbearable, but in terms of a world engulfed in violence that is unlivable. Putting a teen's last letter into conversation with cell phone video testimonies smuggled out of a Georgia prison, Stanley comments on the torture of living and suffocating in violence. An end to this torture is met in the act of self-negation when one pulls the world down too.

Finally, the book's coda delves into what it means to be a body of—and to embody—ungovernability. The ungovernable refuse the state, in its logics and exposures, through abolitionist "improvisational practice" (121). Stanley highlights this through an abbreviated biography of Miss Major, a Black trans activist who was instrumental in San Francisco in the 1990s in providing street-level health care services and gender-affirming community to those looking for family. Miss Major's radical care work, life on the move, and welcoming laugh embody ungovernable persistence.

This book is best read with deep breaths and frequent pauses. Its heavy scenes, acknowledged absences, and careful diction make it so readers are not merely comprehending context and argument, but are confronted with the visceral. By slowing the reading process, the weight of Stanley's words linger. It is in this pause—this care—that abolitionist consciousness finds shelter. Stanley's repetitive use of plural first person pronouns throughout the text function as its own kind of queer subjectivation. If we readers understand these pronouns as not purely descriptive, but as doing the discursive-political work that pronouns always undertake, then the book is a call to activation. We inherit and inhabit the responsibility of shepherding in trans/queer ungovernable worlds. A remarkable contribution to queer theory, an imperative analytic for abolitionist praxis, and a poignant testament to enduring the present world in service of destroying the present world, *Atmospheres of Violence* is a vital text for those who look, labor, and long for livable lives on the horizon.

# Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 204. ↩

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Kerry Keith is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication and Program in Critical Gender Studies at UC San Diego. She is a co-organizer of the Nature, Space, Politics faculty and graduate student working group, a founding member of the UCSD Underground Scholars chapter, and a student thinking through incarceration, environmental (in)justice, and toxicity. She researches infrastructural decay in California prisons to identify material forms of toxicity evident in this system, and as a means to contribute to the call for its abolition.

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## Review of *The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom* by Jessa Lingel (University of California Press)

by Alyce Currier | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** What could we discover about the forces shaping the internet, and what could we learn about how to fight back against those forces if we committed to the metaphor of gentrification? In *The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom*, Jessa Lingel shows that gentrification can be a useful lens through which to expose how power and class play out in online space. In a moment of increasing techno-skepticism, *The Gentrification of the Internet* offers a starting point for action, grounded in the reality of urban gentrification activism with proven results.

**KEYWORDS** technology, media, urban, gentrification, internet, digital media, online culture

*The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom*. By Jessa Lingel. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021. 168 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 9780520344907. US List: \$19.95.

Comparing shifts in the internet to urban gentrification might seem like a stretch, but the internet's role in our culture and livelihoods is only increasing, and so are the stakes of those shifts and their impact on human lives and culture. In 2016, the United Nations declared internet access a basic human right,<sup>1</sup> alongside housing, education, and the ability to participate in the cultural life of one's community<sup>2</sup>—rights all potentially impacted by gentrification.

Jessa Lingel isn't the first to make a connection between gentrification and the internet. Writings on the digital divide have long explored the ways that inequality plays out online. In 2013, danah boyd compared the migration of users from MySpace to Facebook to population shifts in cities, specifically white flight, in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Authors like Lisa Nakamura, Jackie Wang, André Brock, and Ruha Benjamin have written at length about how race (an important consideration in any account of gentrification) and technology intersect.<sup>4</sup> Others have explored how the internet and tech culture shape cities. For

example, Sharon Zukin wrote that the participatory discourse of the internet “forms our social imaginary of the ‘authentic city,’ including the kinds of spaces and social groups that belong there.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, Shannon Mattern argued that conceptualizing and measuring urban environments the way we do computers robs cities of their richness.<sup>6</sup> Other accounts, like Joanne McNeil’s *Lurking*, have traced the commercialization of the internet and its impact on users.<sup>7</sup>

*The Gentrification of the Internet* challenges activists and others to consider what we could discover about the forces shaping the internet and what we could learn about how to fight back against those forces, if we committed to gentrification as a metaphor for the evolution of online platforms. Lingel hopes to “show how gentrification gives us a vocabulary for thinking about the internet’s politics and inequalities” (17). Lingel provides an approachable, succinct overview of how the forces of displacement, isolation, and commercialization play out across digital culture and infrastructure, the technology industry, and urban space. Whether or not the reader fully buys into the metaphor, the book offers a compelling, interdisciplinary examination of the many intersecting forces shaping the internet today.

Lingel explicitly states that *The Gentrification of the Internet* is not intended for other researchers who study the internet, but for “activists and ordinary internet users who want to think critically about the internet” (19). She avoids jargon and footnotes, and includes a glossary. Lingel introduces and intertwines concepts from varied fields and focus areas—for example, key terms from the study of gentrification and turning points in the history of the internet—without overloading the reader. She substantiates her arguments with a combination of personal experience and research, quantitative evidence, and examples and anecdotes from both news media and scholarly sources. Most audiences will find something new, even if some of her case studies, history, and statistics are familiar. For those newer to the study of the internet, Lingel’s engagement with her interlocutors such as danah boyd, Zeynep Tufekci, Finn Brunton, Helen Nissenbaum, and Tim Wu plants seeds for readers to dig deeper.

After introducing the key concepts of displacement, isolation, and commercialization in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 highlights how inequality can be exacerbated both *between platforms*, when competing platforms are displaced by another that comes to dominate the online landscape (22), and *within platforms*, when a platform incentivizes or rewards some groups of users over others (23). Lingel offers three case studies of platforms exemplifying the kinds of online communities that were “left behind” or displaced by Facebook. *Body Modification Ezine* (BME) and Tumblr represent “an older ethic of digital culture . . . that believed that the internet should be weird, that it’s okay for people to be anonymous online, and that community is more about people than profits” (33). Today, these platforms, largely

driven by subculture, could be described as online “ghost towns” (32), and their trajectory “shows us what we stand to lose as norms of digital culture skew to the mainstream” (33). Later on, Facebook’s battle with drag queens over its real name policy demonstrates a turning point, where users’ real identities can become directly linked with practices like “digital redlining,” which Lingel explains can include the practice of biased advertising based on users’ personal information and which has been directly linked to urban gentrification (35–39). Lingel’s prior work with the drag community, with body modification enthusiasts, and on Craigslist adds personal fervor to these accounts of the pre-gentrified internet.

Chapter 3 focuses on “Big Tech,” the corporations driving both online and urban gentrification, and the ways in which finance culture has been infused into Silicon Valley. The case studies in this chapter vividly illustrate how “Big Tech mostly pays lip service to . . . countercultural values while displacing the communities at its core” (51). For example, a group of Dropbox employees wearing branded T-shirts kicked a group of local youth off a soccer field because they had “reserved” the field through an app (50).

Lingel acknowledges that a single book can’t do everything. She is conscious of her own role and positionality with regard to gentrification, as a “White, cis, college-educated woman” who “currently lives in a historically Black neighborhood in South Philadelphia” (20), and acknowledges that there is room for others to examine this topic further as a global phenomenon outside of the United States, where her account focuses. There is also the question of whether the metaphor fundamentally works at all: *was the internet ever really ungentrified?* “The short answer is, no,” Lingel writes. “There was no golden age when the internet was blind to race, class, and gender, no magical era when communities could thrive without corporate interference and a push toward profits” (15). A brief history of internet infrastructure in Chapter 4 acknowledges the role of the military and corporations in shaping the internet from its earliest days. The early internet “involved open collaboration between the government, industries, and university” (77). As the internet grew, the need for top-down organization became evident, eventually leading to a major turning point in 1991, when a ban on commercial internet service providers (ISPs) was lifted. This led to greater internet use across the United States, but also means that today, “a tiny number of players wield incredible control over the infrastructure of the internet, with minimal interference for the internet and decreased benefits for consumers” (81). Chapter 4 focuses on demystifying infrastructure, positing that “demanding change starts with understanding how technology works, who owns it, and how it’s regulated” (71).

Chapter 5 focuses on resistance and offers suggestions for resisting algorithms, crafting new narratives for success in Big Tech, considering the impact of technology on our neighborhoods and communities, and pursuing regulation. A list of resources and activist

organizations is included at the end of the book for readers to follow up and continue this work. Lingel herself is an activist who has closely researched those on the margins of the internet, and the royalties from the book are being donated to the Tech Learning Collective in NYC and the Women's Community Revitalization Project in Philadelphia. Throughout the book, Lingel highlights ideas and practices from activists as well as academics: "Antigentrification activism . . . shows us the need for action at multiple levels: legal action, corporate pressure, demands for local legislation, and direct action" (103).

Reflecting on the central concept of the book, Lingel notes that "a metaphor is only as valuable as its analytical payoff, meaning that it is useful as long as it helps us to think about a phenomenon in a new way" (17). Physical space and online space are interconnected—what happens in one inevitably feeds into the other. Even if we don't believe online shifts map perfectly to the metaphor of gentrification, Lingel shows that gentrification can be a useful lens through which to expose how power and class play out in online space: for example, the way that corporate influences displaced the most devoted users within Tumblr, or how in-person microaggressions within Big Tech companies can create unwelcoming workplaces, impacting the technology that is built. In a moment of increasing nihilism about the role of the internet and the ability of regular people to resist a descent into a technology-driven dystopia, *The Gentrification of the Internet* offers a starting point for action, grounded in the reality of gentrification activism with proven results.

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## Author Information



### Alyce Currier

Alyce Currier is currently enrolled in Pratt Institute's MS in Information Experience Design, expected to graduate in 2023. After studying sociology and media studies as an undergraduate, they spent the last decade working in the tech industry. With a critical but optimistic eye toward technology, they are particularly interested in exploring what it looks like to build strong, intentional communities and systems of support (both online and offline) outside of corporate control, and in building meaningful connections in an increasingly stressful and exploitative attention economy.

[View all of Alyce Currier's articles.](#)

## Article details

Alyce Currier, "Review of *The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom* by Jessa Lingel (University of California Press)," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

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## Review of *Transgender Marxism* edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (Pluto Press)

by E Lev Feinman | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** *Transgender Marxism* is a provocative and groundbreaking union of trans studies and Marxist theory. Exploring trans lives and movements, the authors delve into the experience of trans survival and movement solidarity under capitalism. They explore the pressures, oppression, and state persecution faced by trans people living in capitalist societies, and their tenuous positions in the workplace and the home. The authors give a powerful response to right-wing scaremongering against "gender ideology." Reflecting on the relations between gender and labor, these essays reveal the structure of antagonisms faced by gender non-conforming people within society. Looking at the history of trans movements, Marxist interventions into developmental theory, psychoanalysis, and workplace ethnography, the authors conclude that in order to achieve trans liberation, capitalism must be abolished.

**KEYWORDS** capitalism, Marxism, solidarity, class, trans studies, communism

*Transgender Marxism*. Edited by Jules Joann Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke. London: Pluto Press, 2021, 320 pp. (softcover) ISBN 978-0-7453-4166-8. US List: \$22.95.

The number of trans and gender non-conforming people who are murdered has increased every year since the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) began tracking these incidents in 2013, with 2021 being the deadliest recorded year yet—at least 57 precious trans lives were lost<sup>1</sup>—and at least 21 trans lives have been lost in 2022 to fatal shootings or violence—the majority of which are Black and Latinx trans women<sup>2</sup>. Because these deaths are often unreported or misreported, it is likely that there are others not counted in this data. While this is an important data point, we are doing a disservice to trans lives, to social movements, and to labor organizing by not also measuring trans lives lost to austerity capitalism. The number of trans lives lost to hostile and exploitative living and working conditions, inadequate access to free or affordable housing and healthcare, and antitrans discrimination which prevents access to better jobs, safe housing, and gender-affirming, life-saving healthcare is unknown. In *Transgender Marxism*, an anthology edited by Jules

Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, contributor Nat Raha writes that "social disinvestment and austerity measures have become defining features of the daily lives of many LGBTQ people," (92) especially those who are trans, disabled, migrants, and people of color. What do we lose when we lose count of trans lives lost to lethal capitalism?

With stakes this high, *Transgender Marxism* offers a radical union of trans studies and Marxist theory to reflect on the relations between gender and labor, thus making visible the structures of antagonisms precluding trans survival under capitalism. This compelling collection of essays offers a critical exploration of the potential of Marxist interventions to disrupt the pressures, oppression, and state persecution disrupting trans lives.

*Transgender Marxism* features fourteen essays offering a global range of perspectives written by trans academics and university students, psychoanalysts, movement organizers, artists, and practitioners of psychoanalysis, plus an introduction by the editors and an afterword by Jordy Rosenberg.

While *Transgender Marxism* is thought to be the first full-length publication of its kind, the anthology suggests that transgender Marxism (as an active framework for theorization) builds on a historically and culturally rich tradition of theorizing gender transition, gender non-conformity, and trans struggles alongside Marxist frameworks. Perhaps a future direction to further develop the framework would involve a geneological project charting Transgender Marxist theory in relation to, for example, Wilhelm Reich's "Sex-Pol" essays (written between 1929 and 1934), the poetic contributions of John Weiner (written between the 1960s and 90s), the history of separatist communes, such as the lesbian separatist commune known as the Furies Collective (active between 1971 and 1973), or the organizers behind radical publications such as "The Red Butterfly" (a short series published in 1970), "Fag Rag" (published by the Fag Rag Collective between 1971 and the early 1980s), and the "Gay Left" (published by the Gay Left Collective between 1975 and 1980).

Having effectively contextualized a relationship between Marxism and the struggles faced by trans people in the introduction written by Gleeson and O'Rourke, Chapter 1—"Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context" by Noah Zazanis—introduces agency as a central aspect of gender socialization, thereby making space for the unique particularities of experiences of trans socialization and trans social reproduction. With agency embedded in processes of socialization, social reproduction theory (SRT) becomes open to theories and experiences of trans social reproduction. SRT is a key feminist intervention into Marxism, but one which is premised on a theory of forced gendered socialization, thus making SRT transantagonistic and trans-exclusionary.

In chapter 2, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," Michelle O'Brien highlights trans peoples' experiences of job precarity as a means for understanding the various forms of gender discipline and regulation experienced by all working-class people in their jobs.

Rosa Lee's Chapter 3, "Judith Butler's Scientific Revolution: Foundations for a Transsexual Marxism," frames Judith Butler's paradigm-shifting theory of gender performativity as grounds to call for "transsexual Marxism"—rather than a "transgender Marxism"—thereby putting forth a Marxist analytic that is "refracted through the analysis of gender and sex transition" (62).

In Chapter 4, Jules Joanne Gleeson asks and answers the question, "How do Gender Transitions Happen?" and also why gender transitions happen, exploring these questions from an individual and community perspective.

Chapter 5, "A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction" by Nat Raha, offers the "physical and emotional housework of surviving as lesbian women" (85) and the organizing work of the Wages Due Lesbians movement as a place to theorize social reproduction of LGBTQ+ lives.

Launching off of Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power in Brazil, Virginia Guitzel argues in "Notes on Brazil," Chapter 6, that there exists historical parallels between LGBTQ+ movements for sexual liberation and the labor movement.

Kate Doyle Griffiths' Chapter 7, "Queer Workerism Against Work: Strategising Transgender Labourers, Social Reproduction & Class Formation," argues for the strategic necessity of organizing queer and trans workers—whose experiences can be seen as existing at the "chokepoints of social reproduction" (138)—toward broader movements for universalist politics.

In Chapter 8, "The Bridge Between Gender and Organising," Farah Thompson offers reflections on the limitations of self-love and promises of social organizing, class consciousness, and caring communities as protecting the lives of Black trans women.

In chapter 9, "Encounters in Lancaster," JN Hoad uses the *swerve*, a theory from the classical Greek philosopher Epicurus, to draw a connection between atomic encounters and the matrix of social relations. This chapter situates the development of a trans expertise in developing an ethic of encounters, a survival skill which enables trans people to carefully navigate "social worlds of alienation, enforced heterosexuality, and class division" (166).



Zoe Belinski works with Jasbir Puar's writing on *debility* in Chapter 10. "Transgender and Disabled Bodies: Between Pain and the Imaginary" looks at disability as a relation of material force which reduces certain bodies—such as disabled, trans, and trans disabled bodies—to slow death.

Chapter 11, "A Dialogue on Deleuze and Gender Difference," presents a Deleuzian articulation of transness which "respects both singularity and multiplicity," (200). This contribution is from The Conspiratorial Association for the Advancement of Cultural Degeneracy (CAACD), described as a "collective name for dialogue encouraging lines of flight, and shaking of the habitual" (297).

Nathaniel Dickinson theorizes a liberatory trans epistemology in Chapter 12—"Seizing the Means: Towards a Trans Epistemology"—through conceiving of trans social reproductive labor as productive steps to be taken toward realizing a radically reimagined relationship to oneself and to others.

The provocatively titled chapter 13, "'Why Are We Like This?': The Primacy of Transsexuality" offers Xandra Metcalfe's response to the question of why trans people are trans, Chapter 13 adopts a *transpositive* viewpoint to flip this question on its head and ask why are cis people cis.

In chapter 14, "Cosmos Against Nature in the Class Struggle of Proletarian Trans Women," Anja Heisler Weiser Flower sends us to the cosmos and the stars to theorize the trans proletarian struggle from a cosmic-ecological view to overcome the "metabolic rift between human activity and non-human ecology" (254).

In the afterword, "One Utopia, One Dystopia," Jordy Rosenberg takes up "metabolic rift" to argue there exists "a path into Marx that proceeds through transness," (259) and to ground the call for transgender Marxism in the specificity of our historical moment. Citing the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, nationwide uprisings against police violence and the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade, the uptake in union strikes and victories worldwide, and the relentless legislative attacks on trans children, Rosenberg writes, "The intimacy of deindustrialisation, incarceration, and the recommodified care work sector has come to an extreme crisis in 2020–2021" (263).

Arguing the "oppression of trans people remains unmistakably capitalist" (16), *Transgender Marxism* stands in opposition to the obscuring how trans people "survive in the face of capitalism (or indeed, other modes of production)" (10). Two years into the global pandemic, this extreme crisis rages on, and the numbers of trans lives lost to fatal police and civilian violence continue to increase alongside the unknown number of trans lives lost to policies of lethal capitalism. In 2020, my partner, a queer Black Latino trans man, was

one of the many unknowns. Because state records claim he died of cancer, his life is not counted as one lost due to fatal violence against trans people, yet it is undoubtedly the violent and fatal ambivalence of state capitalism toward trans lives which led to his premature death. His trans experience was one we know all too well, and the one taken up in *Transgender Marxism*: experiences of job discrimination and consequent periods of under- or unemployment, and inaccessible healthcare that made preventative care and treatment largely unavailable to him. No anthology illuminates this truth quite like the rich collection found in *Transgender Marxism*. I recommend *Transgender Marxism* as a must-read for those interested in Marxist theory; trans studies; labor studies; trans liberation; gender and work relations; arguments for abolishing capitalism, property, and the family; and social movements and organizing—especially if interested in solidarity-building across identities within movement-organizing.

## Notes

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E Lev Feinman is a queer, trans, and nonbinary PhD student in Childhood Studies at Rutgers University. They hold a BA in Political Science and Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies from George Washington University. E's research interests are gender, sexuality, kinship, temporality, and childhood. E's work is dedicated to and in honor of their love for their late husband, Bradin Austin Mercado.

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## Review of *Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo'olelo, Aloha 'Āina, and Ea* by Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio (University of Minnesota Press)

by Makana Kushi | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio foregrounds the intimate in aloha 'āina, a Kanaka Maoli conception of caring for land, or that which feeds. She provides a close reading of the classic Hawaiian epic *Hi'iakaikapoliopele* alongside contemporary Kanaka Maoli battles with settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Osorio engages the uniquely Kanaka Maoli genre of mo'olelo by modulating seamlessly between the interpersonal and structural, analysis and composition, and the nineteenth century and the present day.

**KEYWORDS** queer, sexuality, Hawai'i, indigeneity, translation studies, relationality

*Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo'olelo, Aloha 'Āina, and Ea*. By Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 232 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-5179-1030-3. US List: \$25.

*Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo'olelo, Aloha 'Āina, and Ea* by Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio joins the growing body of Hawaiian language scholars who write about mo'olelo, which she describes as "a diverse collection of stories, histories, prophecies, songs, poems, chants, and genealogies that are written, spoken, sung, chanted, and felt" (14). Beyond Kānaka Maoli, readers invested in the politics of translation, Indigenous literary nationalisms, movements to protect sacred lands, and sexual and gendered ways of being that confront the violences of the heteropatriarchal state will be pulled to this text. However, it generously offers all readers a way to imagine intimate relations beyond the settler-capitalist constructions of land as property and love as patriarchy.

The book opens with a mele (song, chant, poem) demonstrating the book's call to suppressed forms of Kanaka Maoli intimacy, hungry for revival. It characterizes the yearning hero Hi'iakaikapoliopele—of the eponymous epic mo'olelo—speaking to her beloved Hōpoe, embodied by a grove of lehua trees. Setting the scene with this mele,

Hi'iaka—and Osorio—ask “Can you see those strange men / Watching from beyond the page,” “how it seems through them / we have been forgotten” (x). Drawing from *Hi'iakaikapoliopole*, family histories, and aloha 'āina experience, Osorio urges her people to remember the intimate web of connections that should keep Kānaka Maoli accountable to each other and to our homelands in a moment of urgent need.

The book features six chapters bookended with introductory and closing remarks, two poems, two short stories, and the opening mele described above. The first two chapters situate the text through the Kanaka Maoli concepts mo'olelo and aloha 'āina. Chapter 1 maps the book's interventions onto Indigenous queer and feminist theory and Hawaiian language work. Chapter 2 introduces Osorio's method and archive with a careful reflection on language and translation. Four versions of the *Hi'iakaikapoliopole* published in Hawaiian language newspapers between 1861 and 1911 make up the book's core archive. Particularly insightful is Osorio's explanation of her method: “rigorous paraphrasing.” Instead of providing direct translations, Osorio includes extensive direct quotes from the mo'olelo that can be read by Hawaiian speakers. She then follows with shorter paraphrases of her own commentary and context for all readers. Cultural studies scholars who do language work can look to rigorous paraphrasing as an alternative to direct translation, which truncates or misrepresents concepts not easily expressed across epistemologies. For an example, she juxtaposes dictionary definitions of gendered and sexual relation censored by Christian conversion with more expansive ones drawn from her reading of *Hi'iakaikapoliopole*. While the book's components could be described as literary analysis, history, storytelling, creative nonfiction, and poetry, Osorio's shape-shifting interdisciplinary method and creative form are best described as itself a mo'olelo.

*Hi'iakaikapoliopole*, spotlighted most heavily in Chapters 3 and 4, is a mo'olelo about a family of akua (land deities) making home of Hawai'i, and their intimacies manifested by acts of creation and destruction that still define the island chain's landscapes today. Osorio also describes the mo'olelo as a refuge for queer Kānaka and other queer Natives, who “unsettle white settler logics of belonging” as they revitalize Indigenous structures of relation (6). Chapter 3 features lessons about different kinds of pilina (intimacy, multifaceted structures of relationality) among lovers and family. Pilina creates a structure in which people are accountable to loved ones, to their loved ones' loved ones, and so on in a growing network of connections. Chapter 4 argues that pilina among people begets pilina to land. Lovemaking scenes are narrated not in physical terms, but as exaltation of the beauty of fragrant flowers, lush groves, steep cliff sides, and more. To exemplify this in a contemporary context, Osorio offers an original poem about the pilina between herself and her wahine with scenes from each of their homelands.

Chapters 5 and 6 apply lessons from *Hi'iakaikapoliopole* to contemporary Kanaka Maoli resistance to the settler state. Chapter 5 contributes to conversations in Indigenous and ethnic studies around positionality, solidarity, and accountability. Kānaka Maoli, their allies, settlers, and tourists have different relationships to the land given their identities, but also because of the ways they do and do not enact pilina. Osorio uses her own displacement from Waikīkī to illustrate the difficult, necessary process of Kānaka Maoli restoring pilina to lands abused and overrun by tourism and capitalism. While Kānaka Maoli have an exclusive *familial* relationship to our 'āina, other *familiar* connections such as the widely appropriated "kama'āina" should be earned with commitment to caring for land and offered by Kānaka Maoli, rather than claimed through self-appointment or purchase. She concludes, "The only way to truly know and love our home is to know and love our people" (137).

Chapter 6 brings lessons from the mo'olelo in conversation with the Kū Kia'i Mauna movement. After laying out the fifty-year legal history of the private yet state-backed Thirty Meter Telescope project, Osorio asks whether Western law remains the only or the most appropriate path of resistance for Kānaka Maoli. The chapter then uses mo'olelo to disentangle Kanaka concepts of leadership and land-based accountability from settler ideas of law and property. Osorio points to mo'olelo moments in which leaders are checked for abusing their power and betraying their relations. Incisively, she shows that Kanaka Maoli governance is not distinguished from the settler nation state by "a lack of violence or a lack of hierarchy but its status as a system in which violence and hierarchies are checked when abused" (168).

In the poems and short stories nestled among the chapters, there are favorite songs, childhood memories, and a poetic retelling of the standoff at Mauna Kea that attest to the resilience of pilina living on in spite of colonization. Osorio ends the book "A'ole i pau," a Kanaka way of saying "to be continued." Indeed, *Remembering Our Intimacies* is a generative opening that invites future Kanaka intellectuals and aloha 'āina to dive into the vast and deep Hawaiian language archive and more broadly into Indigenous ways of governing and relating. Her insights on intimacy remind us that to strive for a just future, we must love each other the way we love the land.

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## Author Information



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Makana Kushi is a PhD candidate in American Studies at Brown University. She studies migrant and Indigenous relationality in early twentieth century Hawai'i.

Having learned 'ōlelo Hawai'i in a Hawaiian language immersion school setting as a child, she is dedicated to the cultivation of resurgent Indigenous educational spaces.

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## Article details

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## Review of *Trans Care* by Hil Malatino (University of Minnesota Press)

by Alex Barksdale | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

**ABSTRACT** Hil Malatino's short book *Trans Care* critiques the heteronormativity of dominant theorizations of care. By taking trans lives seriously, he shows how trans care webs form the basis of trans survival. Malatino deftly weaves together the insights of trans studies and activism with care feminism to explore the archive, cultural production, healthcare, and politics. He broadens feminist and left perspectives on care and brings care from the margins into the center of trans studies. *Trans Care* is a plea for stronger, more egalitarian, and solidaristic relations of care.

**KEYWORDS** feminism, care, mutual aid, trans studies, social reproduction

*Trans Care*. By Hil Malatino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 90 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-5179-1118-8. US List: \$10

After decades of intensified social and ecological degradation, most recently spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate catastrophe, care as a locus of political imagination is center stage in both academic and public discourse. Yet, as Hil Malatino shows in his short book *Trans Care*, the way in which care is theorized, even in feminist circles, has been limited by heteronormativity. By taking trans lives seriously, *Trans Care* represents a guidebook out of these limits, offering new terrains to traverse.

Malatino brings trans care into view, showing how care functions as a fundamental part of trans survival. Trans people form networks of care, or "care webs" in the words of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, to provide everyday economic and social support. In *Trans Care*, Malatino is interested in how trans care webs are constituted. He takes a nuanced survey, highlighting the difficulties of providing and receiving care among marginalized and traumatized populations. Trans care webs are often tattered, threadbare, and unstable. Moreover, as he argues, forms of care can reproduce inequalities, particularly along lines of race and class. This book is a plea for stronger, more egalitarian, and solidaristic care webs.



The first three chapters form a theoretical framework for the book, laying out important conceptual tools. Chapter 1 introduces the project of the book and presents the stakes for thinking about care in the context of a trans-antagonistic world. Resisting the necropolitical move of mining trans death, Malatino asks us to consider what makes trans survival possible. Survival in its most mundane to its most daring is enabled by a multiplicity of relations of care. As an economically marginalized population, trans care webs are typically under-resourced and rely heavily on unpaid labor. Chapter 2 narrates the life story of the Canadian trans activist Rupert Raj to underscore how the "voluntary gender work" of trans care can be unsustainable, leading to burnout. However, Malatino pushes us to think beyond the typical discourses of burnout, critiquing the individualistic, clinical, and hierarchical models of care it presupposes. He highlights the interdependence and lack of separate care-giver and care-receiver roles in trans communities. To truly come to terms with what trans care is and how trans survival can be better supported, these practices cannot remain invisibilized and undertheorized.

Chapter 3 is the core critique of dominant theorizations of care that are unable to "do justice to the complexities of care labor trans subjects both need and undertake" (42). By decentering the heteronormative domestic and bio-reproductive domains, our focus can shift to trans spaces and relations where other forms of care occur. Moreover, following Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Malatino understands care as an emergent ethos, a process of building and maintaining relations. Much trans activism seeks to shift the ethos of institutions to create space for trans people. Beyond institutions, he highlights mutual aid as the interpersonal and networked forms of care most available to trans people, "the multivalent and necessary care hustle that structures so many of our lives" (43). In the only explicit engagement with Marxist feminism in the book, Malatino affirms the fundamental nature of care to reproducing society. As both invaluable and incalculable, he asserts that care cannot be understood within financialized notions of debt. Instead, an ethical understanding of our interdependence has the potential to serve as the basis of convivial and sustainable relations of care.

Malatino identifies the archive as a source of resilience for trans people. Yet historians and other archival researchers are presented with the question, "How to do justice to these lives?" (56). Chapter 4 offers a meditation on the ethics of care and responsibility required to narrate trans lives in the archive. In the next chapter, Malatino focuses on health care, the longest standing and well-established domain of trans solidaristic action. These networks of care are a response to trans medicine, which has been and largely continues to be "economically inaccessible, geographically dispersed, and rigorously gatekept" (61). One prominent example is trans crowdfunding for medical expenses, a common tactic in the United States, where universal health care is non-existent. Drawing on sociological literature, Malatino highlights that crowdfunding often replicates hierarchies of

deservingness alongside raced and classed inequalities. This is a key problem for organizing care: how can we prevent reproducing systems of hierarchy as we try to meet unmet needs? Moreover, as Malatino asserts, it is necessary to name the structural neglect that creates those unmet needs even as the work of mutual aid functions primarily at small scales. Malatino argues for a prefigurative understanding of care, making the plea to treat care as an obligation, where we show up continually for each other.

*Trans Care* is a necessary intervention into discourses and theories of care. Malatino deftly weaves together the insights of trans studies and activism with care feminism. He broadens feminist and left perspectives on care and brings care from the margins into the center of trans studies. However, as a short book—72 pages without notes—in a series for emerging ideas, it is useful to acknowledge its limitations. A reader seeking a fully elaborated theoretical framework or meticulously detailed case studies would likely be underwhelmed. Instead, *Trans Care* whets the appetite for more analyses of and politicization of care from trans perspectives. Malatino provides a solid foundation for others to further develop, flesh out, and problematize what the transing of care means. For organizers, *Trans Care* is useful as a manifesto, making clear the need to build better relations of care, both within the particularity of trans collectivities, and as a vision of a more just world. As we grapple with the social and ecological crises ahead, piecing together more resilient systems that ensure survival for all, not just the few, we need all the tools and maps we can carry.

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## Author Information

### Alex Barksdale

Alex Barksdale is a PhD candidate in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Arizona on Tohono O'odham land. Their research explores trans do-it-yourself (DIY) and mutual aid practices, particularly around health and medicine. They situate their work within trans studies, anarchist theory, feminist science studies, and Marxist feminisms.

[View all of Alex Barksdale's articles.](#)

Alex Barksdale, "Review of *Trans Care* by Hil Malatino (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

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